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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THREE TIMES STOLEN

"As the starting bell rang Nick saw the man take something from his purse and pass it over to Bernice."
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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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Three Times Stolen;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S STRANGE CLUE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A DARK NIGHT'S WORK.

"Your uncle murdered! It seems incredible!"

Nick Carter leaned back in his chair and looked at his visitor, dismay showing in his face.

"It is too true, old friend. Uncle Alvin was murdered in his bed last night, and diamonds to the value of half a million dollars stolen from the house."

The speaker, Charley Maynard, was greatly excited. He had rushed unannounced into the private office of the great detective and blurted out the terrible news as he sank half fainting into a chair. He was a young man who had arrived at legal age only a few months before. Almost from boyhood he had been a friend of the man of whom he now sought sympathy and advice.

"Half a million in diamonds!" echoed the detective. "I was not aware that Alvin Maynard possessed diamonds to that value."

"They were mine," replied the young man.

"The day is full of surprises," said Nick. "When and how did you become owner of such a wonderful collection of precious stones?"

"They were delivered to me yesterday, at the residence of my uncle, up the Hudson," replied Charley. "I heartily wish I had never set eyes on them."

"A present?" asked Nick.

"My inheritance from my father," was the reply. "As you know, he was a globe-trotter from his youth up. It seems that during a visit to South Africa he became the possessor of the gems which were stolen last night. How he came by them I have no idea. I only know that there are some very fine stones in the collection, and that they were delivered to me yesterday afternoon. Now they are gone, my uncle lies dead in the house, my aunt is prostrated with grief, besides suffering severely from a blow dealt by a brutal assassin, and my cousin, Anton Sawtelle, lies wounded in his bed. It is a sad house this morning, Mr. Carter."

"There was a struggle, then?" asked Nick. "The robbers were discovered at their work and fought for the booty?"

"That is the strangest part of the case," said the young man. "The diamonds were stolen from a trunk in my room on the second floor of the house, and yet I heard nothing of the struggle which must have taken place. It seems that the burglars entered by way of Anton's room and searched the entire floor. Why they should have visited the apartments of my uncle and aunt is more than I can understand. I am not a heavy sleeper, yet I heard nothing of the affair until this morning."

"Was no one able to give the alarm until this morning?" asked Nick. "Where were the servants? Surely they must have been aroused."

"They were not," was the reply, "and the first in-

timation I had of the murder of my uncle and the loss of my diamonds was when informed by Anton of the happenings of the night."

Nick walked the floor of his office for a moment.

"What did Anton tell you?" he finally asked.

"He said that he heard a noise during the night and arose from his bed. As he stepped out in the direction of the door opening into the hall, he was struck a savage blow, from the effects of which he did not recover until after daylight."

"And your aunt?"

"She, too, says that she heard a noise and stepped to the door of her chamber. It was dark in the hallway, but her figure was outlined against a window in the wall at her back. While standing there, listening, she was struck on the forehead and rendered unconscious until morning."

"And you were asleep on that floor?"

"Yes, sir, directly across the hall from the room occupied by my aunt. Uncle slept in a room at the front of the house, Anton in a room at the rear. The two rooms between these were occupied by my aunt and myself, as I have already stated."

"The diamonds were in your trunk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was the trunk locked?"

"No, sir, it was not. You see, we have never been molested before, up there. I was not as cautious as I might have been. However, if the trunk had been locked, it would have been all the same, I imagine."

"You might have been awakened by the forcing of the lock," said the detective. "It is strange that you did not hear the sound of the blows which killed your uncle and left your aunt unconscious."

"I wonder at that," said the young man, "for I am not usually a heavy sleeper. But I hope you can come out to the house at once. The sheriff and two deputies are there, but no one save the coroner has been admitted to the second floor. Can you come now?"

"Certainly," was the reply.

"And, another thing," said the young man, hesitation in his voice, "I wish you to act as my personal representative in the search for the diamonds. This may seem to you a selfish request, with the murderer of my uncle still at large, but it is a matter of great importance to me. The diamonds constitute my sole inheritance from my father. Nothing can bring my uncle back to life, but the diamonds, recovered, will make my future life both useful and happy. Besides, the recovery of the diamonds must point to the murderer."

"That does not necessarily follow," replied Nick. "However, I will do the best I can for you. You were at your uncle's yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes; I have been stopping there for a month, at his special request."

"When and where were the diamonds delivered to you?"

"At uncle's, at three o'clock. They were brought up from the city by a special messenger, who took a receipt and returned on the first train south."

"When did you open the package containing the diamonds?"

"Immediately. I was of course anxious to feast my eyes on them."

"Where did you open them?"

"In the parlor on the first floor."

"Who were present?"

"Uncle, aunt, Anton, Bernice, aunt's maid, and myself."

"Anton is your cousin by marriage only?"

"He is a son of my aunt by a first marriage."

"I see. Where was he born?"

"In Paris. He has lived there nearly all his life."

"Were there any servants about when the diamonds were shown? Did the servants see the diamonds at all?"

"No, sir."

"Was the arrival of the gems talked of before the servants?"

"To some extent, yes."

"You were about the grounds in the afternoon?"

"Yes, sir. I remember now that I sat on the side porch a long time, looking over the lawn and garden on that side of the house."

"You observed no strangers about?"

"No, sir. Stay! Two men came up from the station and passed the house shortly after the departure of the messenger who had delivered the diamonds. They passed on about two hundred yards and then turned toward the depot. I did not see them again."

"What sort of appearing men were they?"

"I remember now that their dress and manner gave me the impression that they were sailors."

"The sheriff has charge of the case, I presume?"

"Sheriff Walton is there in person. He was notified quite early this morning at Anton's request."

"What direction is his investigation taking?"

"He has made a study of the grounds, and was at the railroad station when I came away, questioning the agent and the night watchman, who had been sent for."

"I am glad he has been kept out of the house," said the detective.

"I can't get the thing through my head," said the young man. "One man murdered, two persons assaulted and left unconscious, my own room entered and robbed, and I the only one on the floor not aroused by the noise. It seems a strange case."

"Now, about the murder of your uncle," said Nick. "How was the death wound inflicted?"

"He was struck on the temple with some blunt instrument. There was little blood in view. He was in his pajamas and lying across the bed when found. It looks as if he had arisen to a sitting position when awakened, and was then seized by the throat. There are marks on the pajamas and on the neck as though a struggle had taken place."

"And your aunt?"

"There is a cut over the left eye."

"Not a serious one?"

"Oh, no. It is difficult, however, to imagine what sort of a weapon made the cut. It seems to be three-cornered."

"And Anton?"

"There is no question but that he was struck with a pair of iron knuckles. The wound shows that plainly enough."

Nick remained silent for some moments. He was puzzling over the fact that the gems had been so soon located in the house by the thieves.

"By whom were the diamonds delivered?" he finally asked.

"By a messenger from the American Express office."

"Who paid the duty?"

"The express company."

"It must have been a heavy one."

"It was," answered the young man. "It took all my little fortune."

Nick entered the telephone booth and called up the American Express office.

In a few moments he learned that the diamonds had arrived in New York the previous day at noon on an ocean liner, and that they had remained in charge of the company only an hour before the departure of the messenger. No one in the employ of the company except the man who had paid the duty and the manager knew of the valuable contents of the package.

While the detective was puzzling over the case Chick entered and was soon in possession of its main features as known to his chief.

"Where were the diamonds shipped from?" he asked.

"Originally from Cape Town," replied the young man, "but direct from Liverpool."

Chick looked at his chief with a smile on his face.

"It is a pretty case, I imagine," he said. "The gems must have been followed from Cape Town."

"Well, in that case," said young Maynard, "the man who did the following made quick work of it after they arrived in this country. Of course the route to the hiding place of the murderer must be discovered by tracing the diamonds. Don't you think so?" he added, turning to Nick.

"It will, I think, prove easier to find the murderer than the diamonds," said Nick. The gems may be passed on from hand to hand, or separated and scattered to the end of the world, while the murderer cannot halve his crime with anyone."

Nick ordered his automobile, and the three were soon on their way to the country house on the Hudson where the murder had been committed. When they reached their destination they found a crowd of curious suburbanites gathered about the gate, which had been closed and locked by the sheriff.

The house stood some distance from the road in a grove of elm trees. A handsomely kept lawn swept down to the iron fence which shut in the grounds. It was a fine old mansion, with many gables, porches and odd corners. The dull red walls were overrun with English ivy.

After greeting the members of the family who were below, and these were servants, the detectives ascended to the upper floor. The stairs brought them to a long hallway running just west of the tier of rooms at the front of the house.

Entering the front room, they found the body of the dead man lying on the bed. Nick at once bent over it. His impression was that it had been placed on the bed after the death blow had been struck, but the coroner had gone away for a time and he could ask no questions of him.

"It is worth looking up," thought Nick.

As the detectives were beginning their work Sheriff Walton called out to them from the lower hallway.

"I am going away for a time," he said, "but I'll be back. Two suspicious men took a rig from a local stable last night and have not returned it. I think that perhaps they are the men who were here. You will find that the burglars gained entrance by way of the west room and passed on to the front of the house. On the way they got the diamonds from the trunk in Charley's room."

Nick smiled as the sheriff closed the door and took his departure.

"He seems to have solved the case already," said Chick. "I presume he has the murderer in sight now. Good luck to him, say I.

"Here's something to begin on," continued Chick, pointing to footprints on the linoleum in the hallway. "See! There's been a good deal of travel about here, and in bare feet. I don't quite understand this, chief. It looks like the people rushed in here before they took time to dress their feet. I can't see what it means. We have been told that Mrs. Maynard and Anton lay unconscious until morning, so I don't see who did all this walking about. I don't believe people came up here barefooted."

The prints of naked feet led from door to door, and in some places were quite numerous. They passed from the north room to the south room, back again, and from the east room to the north room and back again. The south room was occupied by the owner of the diamonds, the north room by his aunt, and the east room by Alvin Maynard, who lay dead there at the time of the visit.

West of the doors of the side rooms, which were exactly opposite each other, the hall was narrower and led only to a west room, occupied by Anton Sawtelle. The marks here were not those of naked feet. The persons who had walked there and left the record of their passage in the dust wore stockings and narrow-heeled shoes. The person in the stockings seemed to have made two trips to the front room. The other marks might have been made after the discovery of the crimes of the night.

One thing about the stocking marks struck the detectives as peculiar. In each instance the outgoing marks were close together, the incoming marks far apart.

"This chap was in a mighty hurry, coming back," said Chick, reflectively. "He made the return trips in long jumps. Must have got scared in the front room."

"Anton might have visited his father's room before dressing," said Nick, "and discovered the dead body on the bed. That would naturally give him a fright."

"But he seems to have gotten two frights," said Chick, with a grin.

As Chick bent over the tracks Nick moved cautiously toward the front of the hall. He was certain that he heard footsteps there, that some one was watching their movements—noting the course their investigation was taking.

Finally he made a little rush to the front and was just in time to see a mass of dark hair disappearing down the stairs. The wearer of the hair looked back and Nick saw a pair of handsome black eyes.

"We were watched," he mused, turning back to the tracks.

The footprints were distinct. A naked foot will make a plainer mark on a dusty floor than a dressed one, as the moist flesh takes up the dust and leaves a clean-cut impression. Again, quite a heavy rain had fallen on the previous evening, and the dust lay damp and clinging to the linoleum which covered the floor. For these reasons, the marks referred to showed up plainly, even though several persons had passed through the hall and into the rooms immediately after the discovery of the murder. As, however, none of these were without the usual foot covering, the signs of their progress were not confused with the prints of naked or stockinged feet.

"We may as well begin at the beginning," said Nick, after concluding his examination of the hall. "The burglars, we are told, entered by way of Anton's room."

The detectives passed down the hall and entered the rear room, after it had been unlocked from the inside. The young man who had unlocked the door was already back in bed when the detectives entered. His head was bandaged and his face was pale as death, his eyes glaring unnaturally from under heavy brows. He was a remarkably handsome man, although his face, even with the pallor of suffering upon it, showed signs of dissipation. His features were regular, his hair black and waving, and his figure slender and muscular.

"I called to you when you were at the door a moment ago," he said, "but you did not answer. I presume you are Nick Carter? Yes. Well, I am glad to see you. Hope you will find the murderer, and also the brute who gave me this bump on the head. My poor father! He was always a father to me!"

"All in good time," said Nick. "We are about to make an examination of the premises, but would like to ask you a few questions, provided you are well enough to engage in conversation."

"I am very much better," was the reply, "and perfectly able to tell you all I know about this wretched affair."

"What time did you go to bed last night?" was the first question.

"About ten o'clock," was the reply. "We keep early hours up here in the country, you see," he added, with a wan smile.

"Did you retire for the night as soon as you came upstairs? What I mean is, did you move about your room or the hall?"

Sawtelle's face became flushed and he hesitated. Although Nick's eyes were seemingly not fixed on his face, he noted every change of expression. What Nick appeared to be looking at was the gravel roof of a one-story lean-to attached to the building at the west.

CHAPTER II.

CONFLICTING CLUES.

Once the young man opened his lips to reply to the question, but he changed his mind, evidently, and remained silent for a time.

"Give me time to think," he said, after a pause. "I don't seem to remember."

"Did you come up here before your mother and Mr. Maynard came up for the night?"

"Oh, yes; I heard them come up and go to their rooms."

"Did they engage in conversation?"

"They did not," was the hesitating reply. "To tell the truth, they were not on good terms with each other last night. That makes this affair all the more terrible for mother."

"Do you know the nature of their quarrel?"

"I do not."

"Did you leave your room for any purpose after they came up here?"

"I did not."

"Until when?"

"This morning."

"Then you went to Mr. Maynard's room?"

"I went to mother's room first. You see, I had been attacked, and my first idea on regaining consciousness was that some one else might have been wounded."

"That was quite early?"

"Just after daylight."

"Where did you find your mother?"

"Lying on the floor. I placed her on the bed and went on to Mr. Maynard's room. I found him dead, as you know."

"Did you move the body?"

"I did not." This with a shudder of horror.

"Were you dressed?"

"I was not. I had just tumbled off the bed, where I had fallen, or been thrown by the robbers. I think I had my trousers and socks on, that is all. You must understand that about this time I was hardly myself, and was laboring under strong excitement. I hardly know what I did after that. I remember of going to Charley's room and of hearing him cry out that the diamonds had been stolen, however. You know I had lain in an unconscious condition all night from this wound on my head. I asked that Sheriff Walton be sent for and again became unconscious."

"Did you succeed in arousing your mother from her stupor?"

"I called to the servants to assist her."

"How was she dressed?"

"In a pink night robe."

"How about her feet?"

"They were bare."

"Where was she taken then?"

"Directly downstairs."

"She was not able to walk about?"

"Oh, no, she was carried down."

Young Sawtelle closed his eyes as if from weariness and, quick as a flash, Nick lifted something from under the edge of the bed and thrust it into his pocket.

"Now, about the burglars," said the detective. "Do you know about what time it was when they entered?"

"I have no idea."

"What was the first sound you heard?"

"I thought I heard a window rattle, and arose to a sitting position."

"And then?"

"I could see that there was some one in the room and I sprang out of bed to get a revolver which I keep in the closet."

"You did not reach the closet?"

"No. I met an iron knuckle and dropped to the floor."

"Did you visit the closet at all last night?"

"No; I am sure that I did not."

"You caught no parting glimpse of the intruder's face?"

"No. There were two."

"How do you know that?"

"I could see two forms outlined against the window."

"You heard them moving about the room?"

"Only for a moment."

"Did they make much noise in moving about?"

"Very little."

Nick now turned to the windows opening on the roof of the lean-to to the west. The structure was covered with a gravel roof, and during the rain of the night of the murder little pools of water had formed. Into these sand had been swept. Nick examined every one of these closely. In a moment he called Chick to his side.

"Here is the autograph of one of the burglars," he said, pointing to an impression in one sandy pocket of the roof.

"Rubber shoes," said Chick.

"Exactly, with a tear in the sole of the right shoe. It ought to be easy enough to follow this fellow."

Chick made a circuit of the little roof and came back to his chief.

"The cut in the shoe which shows there," he said, "was made after the robber got to the roof. The tin strap which supports the eave trough at the west, where the ladder was raised, is broken and Mr. Burglar stepped on the sharp, upturned edge."

Nick descended the ladder, which remained as the robbers had left it, and walked about the grounds for a few moments, after which he returned to the west room.

"They came from the orchard," he said, "and after the rain."

"The rain fell at two o'clock," said Chick.

Nick turned to Sawtelle.

"It is your notion that you were knocked down as soon as the thieves entered the room?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Isn't it remarkable that Charley was not awakened?"

"He is a heavy sleeper."

"What did he say in the morning?"

"I don't remember."

The young man was becoming nervous and impatient, and Nick and his assistant left the room, first asking permission to return later and search for further traces of the burglars. In five minutes' time, however, the young man passed them in the hall and went downstairs.

The detectives looked at each other in silence for a moment.

"He lies!" said Chick. "Mr. and Mrs. Maynard did walk in the hall last night after they were ready for bed, and he knows it, for he was not asleep. I say he was not asleep because he came out after them. Notice that the marks leading from his door are over the ones made by naked feet, and were therefore made last."

"That looks all right on the face of it," replied Nick, "but he says he passed through the hall this morning."

"I overlooked that point," said Chick, "but, anyhow, he lied about the old people not moving about."

"He might have been asleep," said Nick. "Don't jump at conclusions, my son."

Chick bent over the floor.

"What is it?" asked Nick.

"I am looking for the marks made by the burglars in passing from the rear room to the front one," was the reply.

An inscrutable smile appeared on the face of the detective.

"Look sharply," he said. "Perhaps you may be able to find what you are looking for."

Chick arose and faced his chief with excitement showing in his manner.

"They are not here," he said. "What does it mean?"

"There are the marks of stockinged feet," suggested Nick.

"But these two sets of tracks are the same," said the assistant, "and were of course made by Anton. You have, I think, the socks he wore last night in your pocket," added Chick, with a smile. "Suppose we compare them with the tracks?"

"You saw what I took from under the bed, then?"

"Certainly. I had had my eyes on them for some time."

Nick took the socks from his pocket. They fitted the tracks exactly.

"You see," said Chick. "The burglars never left that back room. Now, who murdered Alvin Maynard? Who stole Charley Maynard's diamonds?"

What Chick stated was the truth. There were no indications that the burglars had left the threshold of Anton's room. And yet the old man had been murdered at the other end of the hall and the diamonds had been stolen from a room which could be reached only by way of the hall!

Nick made no reply. Instead he turned from the hall and entered the room from which the gems had been stolen. Everything was in order there. The diamonds had been taken from a trunk, and this stood near the head of the bed, the cover swung back against the wall.

In the compartment at the right end of the till was a casket, the one in which, under coarser covering, the diamonds had been shipped to New York. The gems had been lifted hastily from the fine paper and cotton in which they had been packed, for the latter were greatly disarranged. Nick took out his glass and inspected the packing. Then he placed some of the cotton and some of the paper in his pocketbook.

The trunk was of metal surface, and at the top of the box the iron had been worn through to the wood. Jagged edges of metal showed all along the edge of the box. On one of these edges Nick found a shred of pink wool, which he placed in his pocket with the other articles.

Nick now entered the room which had been occupied by Mrs. Maynard, going directly to the dresser.

"What do you find?" asked Chick.

"Record of last night's proceedings," was the reply. "It is as plain as if written in ink. I have heard it said," continued the detective, "that no person can enter a room without leaving some evidence of the visit. This may be putting it too strongly, but I am convinced that no person can commit a crime without leaving behind a record of the deed, as plain as printing, if we only know how to read the language in which it is written."

"That has often been proven," said Chick.

The little right-hand drawer of the dresser stood half open, disclosing a collection of stained and rumpled handkerchiefs of fine texture. The top of the dresser was half covered with toilet articles such as women delight in. There were powders and liquid preparations for the face and hands and many other articles designed to keep the marks of advancing years from showing too plainly. Nick picked up a jar of yellowish paste and turned his glass on it. Then he took the pieces of packing from his pocket.

"See here," he said, "the woman went to Charley's room last night, after all was still in the house, and took the diamonds and brought them to this room."

"Impossible!" cried Chick. "That silver-haired old lady a thief—never."

"I did not say that she stole the gems," said Nick. "I said that she brought them to this room. First, how do I know that she took them from the trunk? Notice this jar of toilet paste. When she got ready for bed she used that on her hands and face—a common thing for women to do. Then, after her light was out, and after Charley was in bed and asleep, she entered his room and took the diamonds from the casket."

Chick listened, with wonder showing in his eyes.

"I presume you know where all this points?" he said.

"I know that she extinguished the light before she left her room because she groped her way in the darkness and felt along the door for the knob. She left traces of this toilet paste on the panels. She did the same thing in Charley's room—groped her way in the darkness. More traces of the toilet paste on the door and on the trunk. This shows that Charley was not only in bed, but asleep. Lastly, she left traces of the paste on the packing from which she removed the gems."

"Poor old woman!" said Chick.

"Wait a moment," said Nick. "There is no knowing what her motive was. She brought the diamonds here and placed them in that little drawer at the right of the dresser. See, some of the packing clung to them, and it is still in the drawer."

"It seems to be a clear case," said Chick.

"But the diamonds did not remain in the drawer for any length of time," said Nick. "Did you know Alvin Maynard in his lifetime?"

The assistant shook his head.

"Then you do not know what an inveterate snuff-taker he was. Well, he came in here last night, after the return of his wife, and removed the gems from that drawer. His fingers were soiled with snuff at the time, and he left traces of it on the handkerchiefs in the drawer. The handkerchiefs are also crumpled, showing that the diamonds were not taken out in a calm manner."

"I see," said Chick, more surprised than ever.

Nick now went to the old lady's closet, which opened from the sleeping room, and came out with a pink night robe thrown over his shoulder. He attempted no explanation until they both stood in the

front room, by the side of the bed whereon the dead man lay.

"It is certain that the old lady followed her husband to this room," Nick said, then, "and that a quarrel took place here. Observe how the gathers are torn out at the neck of this night robe. It all ended in her being pushed down or falling in a faint. At any rate, the woman received her wound in this room, and not in the doorway of her own chamber, from the fist of a burglar, as she is said to claim."

Nick walked over to a couch which stood by a front window. The head of the couch was composed of a straight, sharp-cornered piece of quarter-sawed oak, without upholstery of any kind on the edge. On the outer corner of this headpiece was a bruise and a stain of blood.

"It looks to me," said Chick, "that the burglary was a put-up job, and that the diamonds are still in the possession of some member of the Maynard family. Why, for instance, should the old lady lie about the way in which she received her wound, if all is on the level here?"

Nick smiled and pointed to the couch.

"No woman," he said, "would admit a quarrel with her husband, much less a blow. It is therefore easy to understand why she lays the wound to the burglar. Besides, the diamonds she handled last night have been stolen, and it would be indiscreet for her to admit having them in her possession, even for a minute, just before the robbery. And, then, there is the murder. It is hard to believe that any member of the family would murder the old man."

Nick turned to the bed again and regarded the body carefully.

"The blow which killed Maynard," he said, "was not delivered while he lay or sat on the bed. The body was placed there after the blow was struck, and what blood came from the fatal wound was wiped away. We ought to find traces of that somewhere here."

"There you are!" cried Chick. "No burglar would stop to place a victim on the bed, or to wipe away the blood! Now, how is your theory?"

"The woman was revived here," said Nick, "for this night robe is still damp, so her son did not find her unconscious in her room this morning, as he claims."

"I wonder how Anton got along with his stepfather?" asked Chick.

"They never had any trouble that I know of," replied Nick.

"It is my notion," said Chick, "that, as you say, the woman was revived in this room, and also that she witnessed the murder. Yet, according to all accounts, she says nothing of it, which is unnatural, unless it is true that the murderer is known to her and entitled to her protection. And, another thing, both Anton and his mother know more about the doings of last night than they are willing to admit, and they will remain under suspicion in my mind until several points are cleared up."

Nick made no reply. There was a lot of sense in what his assistant said, and yet he was not ready to admit the truth of his deductions. He returned to Anton's room and entered the closet, which the young man had stated he had not visited the night before.

While Nick searched in the closet, Chick remained by the outer door leading into the hall. Presently he heard soft steps at the front of the building. Whoever was moving about there was doing so with attempt at secrecy. As the assistant stood listening, the rustle of skirts was added to the sound of the footsteps.

The steps seemed to enter the east room, where the body lay, to return to the hall, pass into Charley's room, across into the old lady's room.

Nick came to the door of the closet and pointed toward the hall.

"Watch there," he said. "You know a girl came up here a little while ago and ducked away as soon as discovered. This may be the same one."

Chick darted down the hall and entered the old lady's room. Standing in the middle of the floor there he saw a rather pretty girl with black hair and eyes and regular features. She was tall and slender, and seemed to be about twenty years of age. She courtesied and blushed in old-world style as Chick entered the room.

"What do you want here?" asked Chick.

"You are the famous Nick Carter?" asked the girl, speaking in French, a language which Chick understood perfectly.

"Why are you here?" continued Chick. "And why were you here a short time ago?"

"I was not here a short time ago," was the reply, "and I come now at the command of my mistress. Why should you say I was here a short time ago, when I have been with my sick mistress all morning?"

CHAPTER III.

COVERING CLUES.

"And your mistress is Mrs. Maynard?" asked Chick.

"Of a certainty."

Chick saw that the girl was antagonistic, but he did not show what his thoughts were. The only way to secure information from the girl would be to make friends with her. He asked:

"How is Mrs. Maynard this morning?"

"She is very ill, sir."

"It is a terrible affair," said Chick. "It is a wonder that all the people in the house were not murdered in their beds."

"I shall be afraid to stay here now," said the girl, still speaking in French.

"You surely are not going away?" asked Chick. "What will Mrs. Maynard do? She surely can't get

a companion like you—young, devoted and attractive—every day."

The girl blushed prettily. The flattery was winning its way, seemingly.

"I must go about my work," said the girl. "I have to take to my mistress some of her clothes from the closet."

"Can I assist you?" asked Chick.

"Oh, no. It is only a few I carry."

The girl went to the closet. Chick watched her every move and glance. Entering the closet, she looked anxiously about. She seemed disappointed at not finding something she sought. Passing her hands swiftly along the line of garments suspended on hooks, the girl turned them out from the wall and looked behind them.

"You are looking for something?" asked Chick.

"For a dress," was the reply. "It is not here. Ah!"

Standing in the doorway of the closet, the girl's eyes now fell on the pink night robe, lying on the bed where Nick had tossed it.

The girl stepped briskly forth and seized the robe, doubling it up and hiding as much of it from view as was possible.

"And yet she claimed to be looking for a dress," thought Chick. "Here is mistake number one for us. We should have hidden that night robe. I presume the woman will see that we do not get it in our hands again. Rather bright girl this. I wish Nick would happen in here just now."

As if in answer to the thought, Nick appeared in the doorway. Chick saw that his chief had sized up the situation at a glance. The girl courtesied to the new arrival and moved off with the robe under her arm. Nick watched her from the doorway as she passed along the hall toward the front of the house.

When she came to the cross hall, directly in front of the room which had been occupied by the dead man, she dropped the robe to the floor. Instead of picking it up at once, she, with a little exclamation of impatience, gave it a push with her foot which sent it along the floor, not toward the stairs, but to the south, down the hall which ran straight from the head of the stairs to a wing of the house, the upper floor of which was occupied by the servants as sleeping rooms.

Nick stepped quickly forward, but the girl was pushing the robe along with her foot, and the dust on the linoleum was brushed aside, obliterating any marks which might have been there. The detective smiled at the strategy displayed.

The hall down which the girl passed was not a long one, and ended at a door which connected with a hall in the wing. She was, therefore, soon out of sight. As she closed the door Nick saw a disdainful smile on her face.

"That's a bright girl," he said, as Chick stepped to his side.

"Mrs. Maynard is covering clues," said the assistant. "Which shows that she has much to conceal. The girl said she came after a dress, but went away with the night robe which discloses the story of the struggle. She was in Charley's room before she came here. I wonder what she took from there?"

Nick stepped down the hall a few paces and bent to the floor. When he came back he held a shred of cotton in his fingers.

"She took the packing from the casket in which the diamonds were brought here," he said. "Mrs. Maynard is getting well fast. The robe shows the struggle and the packing shows her touch. But she came too late."

Chick drew the little drawer from the dresser and held it out—empty.

"And the handkerchiefs show the presence of the diamonds here, and also the grab made for them by the old man. She must have taken them before I got into the room, although I was only a second behind her. What does it all mean, chief? Is it possible that Mrs. Maynard knows who killed her husband?"

Nick made no reply. He stood in the hallway looking down at a footprint left in the dust by the girl. He ended by taking a tape from his pocket and measuring it. Then he went to the door at the south end of the front hall and turned the knob. The door was locked, but he had it open in a moment.

No one was in sight as he glanced down the hall in the wing. He stepped inside and tried the door to the front room. It, too, was locked, but was soon opened with the picklock Nick always carried. One glance at the interior showed the detective that it was the room occupied by the maid.

It was in perfect order, except that the robe, just taken from the other part of the house, lay across the back of a chair, and the handkerchiefs, just taken from the dresser of her mistress, lay on the bed. So Mrs. Maynard had not really regained them, after all!

"Well," thought the detective, "she may have ordered the girl to get them out of sight. It is a wonder to me that she did not think of that sooner. We should have been all at sea had she ordered that floor swept early this morning."

Nick went to where his assistant stood and announced that he had about concluded his work there.

"What did you find in the closet?" Chick asked.

Nick did not reply immediately. He seemed to be in one of his brooding moods. He walked back to the rear room again and stood at the closet door with his measuring tape in his hands. Again he went to the room where the dead man lay and studied the position of the body and the character of the wound which had resulted in instant death. Once more he went over the hall leading to the door of the west room, this time using a glass on every inch of it. Chick, standing at the door of Charley's room, heard him mutter:

"It isn't possible. I surely must be mistaken. And yet here it is, in black and red, literally. It is too brutal to be true! Too brutal! Too unnatural!"

Chick pondered over the words for a long time.

Nick was not much given to talking his thoughts aloud, and Chick knew that he must be greatly moved to do so now.

But Chick knew that his chief had made some discovery which he did not care to communicate because of his uncertainty as to its bearing on the case.

"It's an odd case," said Nick, presently. "We can only trace the stolen gems to members of the family, and there is the murder."

"But in terror of discovery," said Chick, "is it not possible that even a member of the family might have dealt the blow which killed the old man?"

Nick made no reply. He walked down the hall leading to the servants' quarters and examined the floor both at the door and near it. The cunning maid had swept the floor clean along the path of travel with the robe, but Nick continued his investigations along the walls, where the robe had not touched or disturbed the dust.

At last he turned away and, accompanied by his assistant, passed down the stairs and entered the parlor on the floor below. There they found Charley awaiting their arrival. Nick closed the door which communicated with other parts of the house and asked:

"How long has the maid been here?"

Charley smiled.

"Don't waste your time there," he said. "She came from Paris with aunt ten or more years ago, and is devoted to the family."

"When was your aunt married to Mr. Maynard?" was the next question.

"About ten years ago. They met first in Paris."

"Then the maid was with your aunt before the marriage?"

"I think so. She is more of a companion than a maid, though."

"How long has Anton lived here?"

"About a year."

"And before that time?"

"He lived in Paris."

"Supported by your aunt?"

"I think so."

"Has she an income of her own?"

"Very small one. She lost most of it when she remarried."

"I see. Is Anton to remain here? What I mean is, was it his purpose on coming here to remain in this country?"

Charley laughed uneasily.

"There was nothing else for him to do," he said. "He could no longer live on the money he was receiving, and so he had to go to work or come here."

"Ah! And he did not like the idea?"

"He did not."

"And the maid? She also longs for dear Parree?"

"Oh, you are off the track," said Charley. "They do not get on well when together, and the girl would not leave aunt. There is nothing in that line."

"You think they have a mutual dislike for each other?" asked Nick, with a smile.

"I am certain of it."

"How long since this began to show?"

"Well, they were shy of each other from the first. Lately they have quarreled in the presence of the servants."

"Only lately?"

"Only lately," repeated Charley.

"They knew each other in Paris?"

"Yes, I think so, when they were children."

"Now, how has Anton been supplied with money since he came here?"

"By my aunt."

"Has he ever complained of the size of the allowance?"

"Not that I am aware of, but he has borrowed of me."

"And repaid?"

"Never."

There was silence for a moment, and then Nick asked:

"Was it generally known in the house that the diamonds were coming?"

"Yes. The matter was often talked of."

Again there was a long pause.

"Oh, say," said Charley, presently, "you may as well give up that line of inquiry. We know well enough how the thieves got into the house, and how they got the gems. You see, they left plenty of clues behind. The sheriff thinks he has them located already. What have you discovered?"

The detective had no idea of reporting progress at that time, so he ignored the question and asked for Mrs. Maynard.

"She is too ill to be seen," said Charley.

"And the maid is with her? By the way, what is the name of the maid?"

"Her name is Bernice. Yes, she is with my aunt."

"Is Mrs. Maynard still unconscious?" asked Chick.

"Only partially so," was the reply. "She is in a low condition, physically, and the shock of last night has affected her seriously."

"You have called a physician?"

"Of course."

As the question was answered the physician made his appearance in the parlor. He was old and gray, and had long been in attendance on the family.

"How are your patients?" asked Charley.

"Mr. Sawtelle is so far improved as to be able to take the air in the orchard," was the reply, "but Mrs. Maynard is not satisfactorily recovering from the shock."

"Is she suffering pain?" asked Charley.

"I think not. The trouble seems to be a mental one. I fear for her reason if there is not a change almost immediately."

"Bernice is with her?" asked Charley.

"She was until a moment ago," was the reply. "Then she called one of the servants and left the house."

Nick and Chick exchanged glances and the latter

almost immediately left the parlor, taking the direction of the orchard as soon as he was out of the house.

Passing along the south side of the house, Chick came to a barrier of evergreens which shut out a view of the orchard from the front. Away to the left, however, there was a gate, and the detective turned toward it. As he moved along he heard voices on the other side of the hedge. He could not distinguish the words, but the voices were those of Anton and Bernice!

Chick passed through the gate and walked around the rear of the house to the place where the ladder had been lifted to the roof of the lean-to, hoping to see the couple on the way. However, the voices ceased, and the young people were nowhere in sight.

The doctor quitted the parlor shortly after Chick's departure, and, thus left alone with Charley, Nick asked:

"You said this morning that you are a light sleeper. How did you rest last night? Were you in your usual health when you awoke?"

"No," was the reply. "I had a frightful headache, and my stomach was in bad shape. It is seldom that I awake in bad condition. Perhaps I slept too soundly."

"Did you partake of food or drink after supper last night?" asked Nick.

Charley looked the surprise he did not express.

"Yes," he said, in a moment, "it was a hot night, and we had ice cream and lemonade in the parlor."

"Who suggested it?"

"I think I did."

"Who prepared it?"

"Some one in the kitchen."

"Who served it?"

"Bernice."

"How long did you remain awake after partaking of the cream and lemonade?"

"Not very long. I was tired and soon became sleepy and went off to bed."

Nick walked the floor for a moment.

"I know what your questions mean," said Charley, excitedly. "You think I was drugged last night!"

Nick made no reply.

"I had thought of that," continued Charley, "because of my unusual sleep, but had rejected the notion because every member of the family partook of the refreshments which were served, and because the suspicion seemed to point to some member of the family as the burglar and the murderer."

"Never mind that now," said Nick. "Did you see much of Anton last night?"

"Yes, he was with me until I retired."

"And Bernice?"

"She was with my aunt in the sitting room the greater part of the evening."

"You do not know whether she retired early?"

"Of course not. She usually does go to bed as soon as my aunt releases her from duty for the night, and aunt went to her room early last evening, before I did, in fact. Anton was the only one in the parlor when I left."

"Where was Bernice?" asked Nick.

"She was somewhere about the house. I remember now that aunt did not require her services in her chamber."

"She might have been in bed?"

"No, she was not, for I heard her voice downstairs just before I left for my room. She was somewhere at the back of the house."

"What time did Mr. Maynard go to his room?" asked Nick.

"He was there most of the evening. He had what the boys call a grouch about something, I guess."

"Where were the diamonds during the evening?"

"In my trunk."

Nick pondered a moment and turned away, going to the door, from which he turned back to ask:

"Were the diamonds in your trunk when you went to bed?"

Charley laughed.

"No doubt of that," he said. "I looked at them."

Nick walked to and fro on the lawn until Chick came up.

"You found Bernice in consultation with Anton, I presume," he said.

"Yes, they were in the orchard together."

"You could not hear their talk?"

Chick shook his head.

The county physician who served as coroner was now summoned and the body placed at his disposal.

"I am sorry to have delayed you in your work so long," Nick said, "but I did not want to miss any possible clues by having it removed before a thorough examination of the room had been made."

"Oh, that's all right," said the coroner. "I'll get a few of the neighbors together and hold an inquest right away. It will be death at the hands of some person unknown, I suppose. Rather a bold deed, sir?"

"Yes," said Nick, soberly, "rather a bold deed."

CHAPTER IV.

A GROUP OF THREE.

"Shall you attend the inquest?" asked Chick, as the two detectives moved away in the direction of the orchard.

"No," was the reply. "As the coroner said, the verdict will be that Maynard came to his death at the hands of some person or persons unknown. I want the formalities through with as soon as possible."

The detectives now found themselves at the foot of the ladder which had been raised to the lean-to roof by the burglars. The footprints were still plainly visible.

As has been stated, rain had fallen on the previous night, and the surface of the earth was still damp.

The marks of rubber soles were still to be seen in the soft mold between the trees. They led to the north side of the orchard, then across a pasture lot and on to the highway running parallel with the railroad track. They were lost only when the men approached the station platform.

"This looks like a put-up trail," said Chick.

"It looks like the work of amateur burglars," said Nick, "who depend upon losing themselves in the city and thus escaping the officers."

"I wonder if they carried the diamonds over that route?" asked Chick.

"And I was wondering," said Nick, "if they knew what to do with the gems when they got to the city."

"How could they have the diamonds?" asked Chick. "They did not get beyond Anton's room, and the diamonds were not there. I guess the members of the Maynard family were too quick for them."

"Don't jump at conclusions," warned Nick.

"Well, I don't like the looks of things up there," said the assistant, "and I have an idea that they ought to be watched."

"Of course," said the chief. "You are to go back there and hang around with Charley Maynard as soon as we land these fellows on the train, or become convinced that they did not take a train back to the city."

"There is a train leaves here at four o'clock in the morning," said Chick, referring to a time table. "They might have taken that."

The fact was that Chick found himself not a little puzzled at the attitude of his chief in the case. Had he been permitted to have his own way, all the investigations would have been confined to the Maynard house.

He regarded the burglary as merely incidental, and would not have wasted a moment on it. As he explained to Nick, he did not see how the burglars could have committed the murder or stolen the gems, as they had penetrated into the house no farther than the rear room.

He determined that if he was left at the house in charge of the case there the inmates would have some pretty hard questions to answer.

Nick must have detected his intentions for he said:

"Let the inmates of the house alone; let them say and do what they please, and go where they see fit; but keep your eyes on them. I want to know whom they see and what they do."

"Very well," said Chick, not a little disappointed.

"Now," continued the chief, "it may be that Charley was drugged on the night of the murder and robbery. See what you can learn about that."

"You think that probable?"

"It is at least possible," was the reply.

"Then that shows a desire on the part of some one in the house to rob him. As I said before, I think the burglars were on a worked-out claim."

Nick chuckled but said nothing.

Chick had differed with his chief in so many cases which had been won that he was not inclined to force his opinions to the front, so he remained silent.

The railroad station at which the detectives now stood was a small affair, and was usually closed in the nighttime. No through trains stopped there, but at 4 o'clock in the morning a local passed in to the city, and an agent was always there at that time.

A short distance from the station was a little suburban store where fruit and light lunches were sold. Many suburbanites took and left the trains there during the day and the keeper of the store did quite a business.

Nick approached him as he stood serving coffee and sandwiches to two travelers.

"Were you here this morning?" he asked.

"I sleep here," was the reply.

Nick called him aside as soon as his customers left.

"Were you in your place of business when the train passed here at four o'clock this morning?" he asked.

"The place was not open," was the reply, "but I was awake."

"Did the train stop?"

"Yes, sir. It always does. There are usually early birds out. We call them four-o'clock-ers."

"Their work in the city begins early?"

"I suppose so."

"Do you happen to know whether any strangers were about here when the train came in?"

"Yes, sir, I do," was the reply. "I usually don't, but this morning a fool couple got under my window there at the back of the house and whispered, and talked, and quarreled, until I was ready to get up and fight."

"You could not hear what they were saying?"

"I caught a word only now and then. I was too mad to listen quietly."

"That was a queer place for a conference—under a sleeping-room window," suggested the detective.

"Oh, they probably thought the house unoccupied during the night. It doesn't look much like a residence, now, does it?"

The man cocked his head to one side and regarded the little structure, built of plain boards nailed on perpendicularly and battened, with a critical eye.

"But the people who usually come to this station know your habits, don't they?" asked Nick.

"I should think they ought to," was the reply. "I have been here long enough."

"Then these men must have been strangers?"

"Oh, I have no doubt of that."

"You say they quarreled?"

"Not until a third man came up."

"So, there was a third man?"

"Didn't I say three at first?"

"No, you said two."

"Well, there were two at first, and then a third man came and they got into a mix-up over something."

"Did they fight?"

"Only with their mouths."

"About what?"

"About putting something in a trunk."

Nick saw that the country merchant did not know how to relate what had taken place with reference to the leading points, so he was obliged to humor him and ask many questions.

"So they had a trunk?" he asked.

"Didn't I say they had a trunk?"

"You did not. Was the trunk delivered there in a wagon?"

"No. A man, the third man, brought it on his shoulder."

"Did they open it?"

"Of course. Didn't I say they quarreled about putting something in it?"

"Did they put something in it?"

"Yes, after a lot of talking."

"What did they say?"

"Two men said it was safer to carry the package, and the third man said they knew what his orders were."

"Did you hear any names mentioned?"

"Just one."

"What was that name?"

"Hartley."

"Ah!"

It was with difficulty that Nick concealed his joy. Hartley was the name of a noted diamond dealer in New York, and Hartley was said by the police to furnish money for enterprises of a shady nature!

Surely the case was coming like silk off a reel. All the difficulties experienced at the house were fading away, so far as the recovery of the diamond was concerned.

At least it looked that way at that moment.

Nick was never extravagantly hopeful over his cases, but he now thought that the diamonds were as good as found. And, with the burglars under arrest, it would be easy to solve the problem of the murder.

"What was said concerning Hartley?" asked Nick, in a moment.

"I only heard his name mentioned once."

"You heard nothing said regarding the contents of the package they put in the trunk?" asked the detective.

"I heard one of the men say that they would be fools to give up so much without getting their money down."

"Ah!"

So Hartley had already arranged for the diamonds to be delivered to him!

The third man was Hartley's agent!

"Where did this third man come from?" asked Nick.

"I don't know. He must have come in from some of the burglars where the morning train does not stop, and carried his trunk with him."

"Was it a large trunk?"

"No. A small one."

"What did they finally do with it?"

"They gave it in charge of the baggageman when the train came, after getting it checked by the station agent."

"Who did?"

"The man who brought it."

"With the package inside?"

"I suppose so."

"You saw them hand it over?"

"Yes. The men parted after the train came in, and I did not see the two Englishmen again."

"Oh, they were Englishmen?"

"Yes. Didn't I say so?"

"The man must have bought a ticket to get the trunk checked?"

"Of course."

Things seemed to be coming Nick's way. It would be easy to secure a description of the man from the baggageman of the train.

"This looks too easy," thought the detective. "I'll get a dump soon, all right."

"Did the men part in anger?"

"Why, when they all ran off, they did not have time to say good-by to each other. They were too much in a hurry."

"What is coming now?" thought Nick.

"You did not say that they got away in a hurry," he said.

"Oh, didn't I? Well, they did. They found out that some one was listening. That was just after the train came in. So they ducked and the man who had been listening went to the train.

"How long was he there?"

"Just a minute. When he came up to where the trunk had been opened, after they left, the girl made her appearance, and they walked away together in the direction of the platform. I did not recognize either of them. You see it was dark, and they were not close to the window."

"Now you've brought a girl in," said Nick. "You must have had quite a matinee under your window this morning."

"Didn't I tell you about the girl before?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, it struck me that she was down here to meet some one who came on the train and went away on the train."

Nick began to look puzzled. This was not so easy. Who was this girl? Could it have been Bernice? Could it have been any one from the Maynard house? Had the girl and the strange man been sent there to watch the others and see that the trunk was on the train according to arrangements previously made by Hartley?

Nick had a notion who the Englishmen were.

They were probably the sailors Charley had seen the previous afternoon.

Chick had suggested that the diamonds had been followed from Cape Town or from Liverpool, and this might prove to be a fact.

The part of the third man was plain enough, Nick thought. He was there to receive the diamonds from

the thieves. Hartley would take no chances of their being delivered to him in the city.

But this fourth man and the girl?

That was the puzzler.

"How many girls live close about here?" asked Nick.

"Girls? Dozens of 'em. What with the daughters of the suburbanites and their maids and servants, I can't begin to keep track of them."

"But none live close to the station."

"Oh, they are often about here at the time this early train passes. I don't know where they all come from, I'm sure."

"Well," said Nick, "if a man came here on a train and left on the same one, and met a girl here, it must have been by previous arrangement, of course, and may occur again. You keep your eye out for a couple of weeks when this morning train passes and you shall be well paid for your work."

"All right," was the reply, as the man pocketed a bank note of liberal denomination. "They won't get away from me again."

Nick now went to the station agent and asked about the tickets purchased for the early morning train. The agent declared that none had been bought that morning.

"But a trunk was checked," insisted the detective.

"That was on a ticket bought in the afternoon," said the agent.

"Do you know how many people took that morning train from this station?" asked the detective.

"I do not."

"Did you see people waiting for the train here?"

"Say," said the agent. "I don't know what's getting into folks to-day. It seems that there was something doing when that train went by."

"Ah! the sheriff has been here?"

"Yes, and a lot from the Maynard house."

"Who, for one?"

"Anton Sawtelle for one. Got quite a clip, didn't he?"

"Sure he did," was the reply. "What questions did he ask?"

"Just about what you did. He wanted to know who left here on the morning train."

"And you could not tell him?"

"Certainly not. The conductor may be able to, though."

"Did Sawtelle give descriptions of people and ask you to verify them?"

"He asked for two men carrying the odor of rum, and for a black-haired girl."

So here was the girl again!

And Sawtelle knew of her presence at the station!

"What else did he say about the girl, or about the men?"

"He said the men talked with a strong London accent; nothing more about the girl."

Anton must have hastened to the station while the detectives were at the house!

There was now no such thing as leaving him out of the case!

"Who left the train here?" asked Nick, in a moment.

"I am certain that no one left the train here."

"Anton asked about a girl. Did you notice a girl loitering about here previous to the arrival of the train, or after it left this morning?"

"I did not. No girl came in here."

"So the girl, if there was one, kept in the background?"

"Yes; that's it."

Nick left the agent and walked up and down the small platform.

"The gems may be at Hartley's by this time," he thought. "The two Englishmen who smell of rum and talk like London may be on the ocean by this time, but I imagine I know where the girl is. This case is not so mixed, after all."

But Nick was soon to learn that it does not profit one to build up hopes while in pursuit of criminals. They are an uncertain lot, and, fighting for their life, or their liberty, their daily warfare with the world makes them desperate and resourceful. Nick soon changed his notion that he had a walkover in the case.

He was to be sorely tried, and to face great personal danger before the end of the case was reached.

After a long talk with Chick, he took a train for New York, hopeful and enthusiastic over the clues he had already uncoiled.

Chick returned to the Maynard home.

It was dull there, and for a long time there was no movements among the inmates that seemed worthy of attention.

Then queer combinations began to form.

CHAPTER V.

CUNNING FOES.

That evening, while Chick sat in comfort on the north porch at the Maynard house, strong in the belief that his chief had gone to New York in quest of a murderer and thief who was then in that house, Nick was standing in front of a small, mean-looking store near Chatham square.

There was a pawnbroker's sign over the door, and diamonds were shown in the windows in goodly quantities. On the door itself, the top half of which was of glass, was the line "Diamonds Bought and Sold." Below was the one word: "Hartley."

The detective had reached the city at three o'clock, and at once "made up" for an inspection of the diamond merchant's place of business. Standing across the street from the three gilded balls, the detective had the appearance of a sailor having a leave of absence

and a desire to observe all that was worth seeing in the city.

The night was warm, it being not far from the middle of August, and Nick wore only, besides shoes, stockings and hat, a pair of breeches, very wide in the legs and very much down on the hips by reason of there being no suspenders, a coarse shirt, open at the neck, and a great neckerchief which was knotted low down on his breast. His hat was hard and glazed, and the brim was bent into many shapes, as if from long service on many seas. As he now and then drew his breeches up to their proper position he rolled a great quid in his mouth which was not tobacco, and expectorated with a vim. His half-bare arms were nearly covered with anchors and sporty mermaids in blue.

Presently Nick went into the store and stood by the front counter, which was covered with showcases, each containing diamonds of all sizes and shades. The salesman who came forward to wait upon him leaned on one of the cases carelessly and looked only casually at the pretended sailor.

"I wants to sell me di'mond," said Nick.

"Let's see it, mate."

Nick took from his pocket a superb stone worth fully $500. It was finely cut and had been removed from its setting. In fact it was a scarf-stone which the detective frequently wore.

"'Ow much for it?" he asked.

"Where did you get it?" asked the clerk.

Nick gave an impatient hitch to his breeches.

"This hain't no bloomin' police station, is it?" he asked.

"No," was the reply, "but we like to know where the goods we buy come from."

Nick put the stone back into his pocket and moved toward the door.

"Wait," said the clerk. "How much do you want for it?"

"Four 'undred," was the short reply.

"I'll give you fifty dollars," said the clerk.

Nick went back and began to haggle with the clerk. What he wanted was to keep in the store long enough to size it up thoroughly. Besides, he had a notion that the two men who had been described as smelling of rum and talking like London might pay their respects to the diamond merchant.

Now and then during the conversation Nick walked to the front door and looked out into the street. Just across the way Patsy, next to Chick, his best assistant, stood in a make-up similar to that worn by his chief.

Nick had an idea that the two sailors, who were evidently unused to the ways of New York crooks, would loiter about Hartley's place. There was no reason why they should do so, if the deal Nick suspected had been carried out, except the instinct which brings strangers in a city back to any place in which they have had dealings or in which they have eaten or slept. This instinct of humanity is so well known to criminal officers that they build up many a case on the supposition that the men wanted will go to any place in a strange city which they have once visited.

Patsy was watching in the street for the reason that the men might visit the vicinity of the diamond shop without actually going in. If they came within sight he was to motion to Nick if it were possible to make him see, through the crowd, and if not he was to go to the store after him.

But it was not necessary for Patsy to signal to Nick or to call him from the store. As the chief approached the glazed door after being in the establishment for some time he saw two men resembling the ones he sought standing in front of the store. They were talking together earnestly, making quick gestures with their hands.

Nick passed out into the street and halted near them. One of the men looked the detective over and approached him, pushing pedestrians aside like a man in the fighting stage of intoxication.

"'Ello, shipmate," he said, laying a hand heavily on Nick's shoulder. "Doin' biz with that bloomin' shark?"

"'E won't buy," replied Nick. "'E wants the bloomin' hearth, 'e does."

"'E's a shark, a' Hindian hocean shark," roared the sailor. "'E's got to take a broadside from me the day."

"You ain't out on no bloomin' desert island now," said Nick. "You'll get in irons, that's what you'll get, if you lay alongside of that pirate here. Offered me seventy-five dollars for a five-hundred-dollar diamond, that's wot 'e did, blast 'im."

Patsy came up at this moment, and the four wandered away to a drinking place on the Bowery and sat down at a table. Nick was by no means certain that the men he was with were the ones he sought.

They drank rum liberally at Nick's expense, but did not appear to get much the worse for their libations. They cursed Hartley from keel to topmast, as one of them expressed it, but refused to mention the cause of their hatred.

"You're from Lonnon," Nick said, after a time. "'Ow is the old town?"

Nick knew London like a book, and his reference to the music halls and sailor resorts set the men to talking.

"We're goin' back, when we gets brass enough," one of them said. "We've come over 'ere on a bloomin' cruise after the wind on the tops of the tall buildings, that's wot we has, mate."

One of the men sprang to his feet.

"Hi'm goin' after 'im," he said.

"You're drunk," said the other. "Let 'im alone."

"Hif you're afraid to go, Hi goes halone," was the reply.

"I'll go with you to see the shark," said Nick.

The sailor seized Nick's hand and almost dragged him to the door.

"We'll board the bloomin' pirate," he said.

The detective began to think that he had made no mistake in figuring on the movements of the two strange men.

"This man is drunk," he thought, "but not so drunk as he pretends to be. He has probably nerved himself with liquor for an unpleasant interview. If he is the man I suspect him to be, the fact is likely to come out in the talk between the merchant and himself. If he is not one of the sailors who appeared at the Maynard house yesterday, I shall soon know that."

The detective was now in a section of New York where the life of a man known to be in quest of law-breakers is hardly safe. The lawless ones of the great city often make that section their home when pursued by officers of the law, and will defend each other to the death.

The establishment of the diamond merchant was ostensibly respectable, but there were in police records accounts of men and women who had entered the half-glazed door possessed of valuable gems and had never returned to their former haunts. Nick knew that the outlaws of New York boasted that there were hidden cellars and secret rooms and stairways in the buildings of that quarter which no officer had ever been able to discover.

The sailor entered the store and advanced toward the rear, which was dimly lighted by a yellow jet of gas, the daylight which came through the dusty glass in front not penetrating into the back of the long room. There, on a high stool at a standing desk, bent over the pages of a great book of accounts, was a man with iron-gray hair and stooping shoulders. He glanced up as the two men approached, and Nick made a mental note of the keenest black eyes he had ever seen under a mass of gray hair.

The sailor stepped up to the desk and laid his arm insolently on a pile of books at the merchant's elbow. Then he steadied himself and glared at the figure before him.

"You are here again, are you?" asked the merchant, impatiently. "I told you to keep away from here."

"You know wot I come for," said the sailor, sullenly.

"Who is that with you?" demanded the diamond merchant, suspiciously.

"A mate I picked hup out 'ere."

"If your mate has influence with you," said the merchant, "I advise him to use it in getting you aboard ship as soon as possible."

"Hartley is playing a bold game," thought Nick.

"'And hout hour coin, then," said the sailor, "an' we'll go soon enough."

"We have had enough of this," said Hartley. "You must cease to persecute me or take the consequences. However, this is no matter to discuss before a third party. Come with me, and you, matey, remain where you are."

Hartley moved toward a rear door, accompanied by the sailor, and Nick stepped back to a chair which stood at the end of the counter, hidden from the front by a stack of boxes and books. The clerk in front walked back and saw that the detective was in the chair and returned to the front, seemingly to watch through the door for customers.

The thing for Nick to do now was to listen to the conversation which was to take place between the men who had just left him. But how? There were two doors opening from the room to the rear. One was at about the middle of the store and the other was close to the wall at the left, and about opposite the chair in which Nick sat.

Hartley and the sailor had passed through the centre door, so this probably led to another room. The other door, being near the wall, undoubtedly led to a hallway running to the rear of the building. Nick resolved to investigate. Seeing that his weapons were handy, he moved toward the side door, being careful to keep below the top of the long desk.

The clerk was apparently busy in front and did not hear the door open, as Nick supposed, and so the detective stepped into a dark passage and prepared to bring his lantern into use. Then, before he could

take the lantern from his pocket, he heard a sharp click, like the movement of a metallic spring, and dropped into the darkness.

The floor had fallen away beneath his feet, and he was sliding down a well of a place which seemed scores of feet deep and just large enough in diameter to permit the passage of his body. It was the old trick of lower New York, which had been worked thousands of times and will be worked as many times more.

Nick, who had been up against the trap-door game before, would naturally have been more careful in that treacherous establishment only for the fact that he believed his disguise perfect, and Hartley rather above the murder of inquisitive men whom he had had no occasion to suspect of greater interference with his plans than the opening of a door for the purpose of listening to a forbidden conversation.

As Nick dropped into the dark tunnel, he heard a trap-door close above his head, and at the same instant his right heel caught in what seemed to be little more than a horizontal crevice in the wall of the place. At the moment of falling he had crowded his feet out to the sides and his hands to the front, in hope of finding some break to check his fall.

Finding that his heel was slipping from the place where it rested, Nick drew out his knife, which opened as he removed it from his pocket, the blade being controlled by a spring at the back, and drove it into the wall to his left. Supported by this and by the foothold on the right, the detective began an investigation of the place.

He could have used his lantern readily enough, as the right hand was free, but he was afraid of watching eyes, so he groped about in the darkness, hoping to find an outlet about where his heel had struck.

He understood the trap games of New York well enough to know that the shaft communicated with more than one basement of the building, which was an old one and probably full of devices for the destruction of unwelcome guests. If he could come upon a door connecting with the floor directly underneath the store, the trick of the diamond merchant might after all be turned to good advantage.

A careful examination of the wall on the right convinced the detective that the door to the first basement was where his foot had struck, that, in fact, his heel rested on a bit of flooring under the crack of the door.

"Now," he thought, "I wonder which way this door opens? If they throw people down here, it opens into the room; if they back people up against the wall and let them fall in, it opens into the shaft. Ah! Here it is."

The door gave way under the pressure of Nick's foot and a faint light crept into the shaft. There was a light at the front of the first basement, and men were there engaged in unpacking boxes.

It was no easy matter for Nick to change his position so as to pass through the doorway, but he succeeded at last, and stood in the shadows cast by the flaring gas jet in front. He knew that those at work could not see him, so he moved about with considerable confidence.

The basement was used for storing and packing and unpacking goods of many kinds. At the back, where Nick stood, it was well nigh filled with boxes of various sizes. At the right of the basement, facing from the front, was a stairway running to the store floor above. This, the detective thought, might lead to the rear room where the talk between the diamond merchant and the sailor was in progress. He mounted the steps halfway and paused, listening for the sound of voices. As he waited he thought with wonder at the position in which he found himself.

That a New York merchant of the apparent respectability of Hartley should occupy a place of business set with a man-trap of the character which had caught him was incredible enough, but that he should actually bring it into use was almost beyond belief. It meant much to the detective. It showed him that the establishment was one in which such devices were considered necessary to the business of the proprietor, and therefore one which should be broken up by the police. It was almost incredible that such a den should exist within a few blocks of Broadway.

Presently the sound of voices came to the ears of the listening detective. First he heard the smooth tones of the merchant saying:

"You have betrayed me, and you cannot deceive me again. The best thing you can do is to leave the country, and leave it at once."

"'Ow can we get hoff without th' coin? Tell me that!" answered the voice of the sailor. "Hi'll split on the game if we don't get hour hown."

"What have you done with the diamonds?" demanded the merchant.

Nick bent forward eagerly.

At last his quest was to be crowned with results.

What diamonds could be meant save the ones stolen from the Maynard home?

"Hi gave them to the bloomin' toff you sent hup there," was the angry reply.

"That is not true," said the merchant. "You gave him a counterfeit package, and stood by while he packed it in the trunk and checked the trunk. From the moment the trunk was closed in your presence it was never opened again until it was brought here. You stole the diamonds and now you try to blackmail me."

"This is something like!" thought Nick. "The diamonds were placed in the trunk, as I supposed, and shipped here. Hartley says he never received them. Sailor says he delivered them to the agent. Now, which one lies, and where are the diamonds?"

"Hit's a bloody lie!" shouted the sailor. "Your bloomin' pirate got the gems."

"You talk of splitting on the game," continued the merchant. "What do you know of the murder which took place at the Maynard house on the night of your visit there?"

"That's gaff!"

"Gaff, is it?" demanded Hartley. "Read the newspapers when you go out and see if I speak the truth. Maynard was murdered in his bed on the night you secured the diamonds. You'll both find yourselves in the electric chair if you say too much about the affair."

"S'lp me!" cried the sailor, "Hi don't know of any murder. Hi——"

The merchant interrupted him.

"I don't want to know anything about it," he said. "I merely repeat my former advice, which is to get out of the country."

Nick waited in vain for the sailor to go on. What words were on his tongue when so suddenly checked? He made general denial. Who, then, had murdered Alvin Maynard? Where were the diamonds?

Nick was listening to the voice of one of the men who had stolen the gems, yet he was no nearer a solution of the murder mystery than before. He believed what the man said regarding the murder. He had not even known of it until informed by the merchant. Even now he seemed to doubt the truth of the statement.

"I'll land him in the Tombs when he leaves here," thought Nick, "and we'll see about the murder later. It is possible that, after all, he knows where the diamonds are, and yet, men of his character don't usually hang about for a little money when in the possession of half a million in diamonds."

But Nick's plans were defeated by something which happened on the floor above. He heard a quick blow, a fall, and then the groans of a man in agony. As he was about to spring up the stairs and through the door at the top, the sound of another voice came to his ears:

"How was that for a knock-out?"

It was the coarse voice of a bully.

"Very well done," replied the merchant. "Put him in the shaft with his mate."

"Croak him?" asked the other.

"No; fix him up so that he won't know his own name when he is able to be about again," was the reply.

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH COMES TOO SOON.

"So that he won't know his own name when he is able to be about again!"

Nick knew very well what that meant. The sailor was to be beaten, and imprisoned, and drugged, and frightened, until he became crazed; and then turned out into the world again. Even if some faint glimmerings of what had taken place should come to him, no one would credit the statement of a half-crazed sailor, who, as would be believed, came by his infirmity on the high seas and had forgotten!

"It is devilish!" muttered the detective. "I wonder how I am going to get at the fellow before they quite kill his intelligence?"

Locked in the unconscious brain of the sailor was the story of the taking of the diamonds, if not the story of the murder of Alvin Maynard.

If he could only communicate with Patsy, sitting there in the saloon with the other party to the robbery! If Patsy only knew, then the whole thing would be easy.

But Patsy did not know, and the sailor who sat across the table from him, drinking rum and cursing the diamond merchant, was for the present safe from arrest.

The fact that the diamond merchant had been implicated in the robbery could not aid the detective at that time. He had no proof except the words of the sailor he had heard while listening on the stairs. But all in good time the necessary evidence would be found, he was certain of that.

Nick might now do one of two things.

One was to remain in the basement and get to the sailor after he had been dumped down the shaft. Wounded and in fear of death, the man would be likely to tell all he knew about the diamond robbery.

The other was to force his way out of the basement and take the sailor with Patsy into custody. This man probably knew as much of the affair as the other.

After studying the matter over Nick decided to remain and assist the sailor out of the den he was in. the other man might prove sullen and refuse to talk after being placed under arrest. Besides, humanity prompted the detective to help the wounded sailor. Only that such a course would have placed Hartley on his guard and defeated all his plans, Nick would have beaten down the door and rushed to the rescue of the sailor then and there. In fact, this was his first idea, but he quickly saw that to do so would be to imperil the success of the case.

But it was not entirely in the hope of recovering the diamonds that the detective decided to remain where he was.

There might be peril in remaining, but there were things to be cleared up of more importance than the recovery of the diamonds.

The sailor might be able to throw some light on the strange murder of Alvin Maynard.

At least he would be able to tell how the diamonds had been secured, and to explain the situation in the house at the time of his visit.

He was positive that the robbers had not passed beyond Anton's room, and he wanted an account of what had taken place there.

There were many things to be explained, and the sailors were the only ones who would be apt to tell the truth.

Presently a noise like that made by dragging a heavy body over the floor came from the private room just over Nick's head.

The paid assassin of the diamond merchant was about to complete his task.

Just at this moment the workmen employed at the front of the basement extinguished their light and went away.

Nick could have hugged them for leaving him alone there at that time.

Their departure gave him an opportunity to work out a plan which had been forming in his brain.

The sailor was undoubtedly badly wounded now, and would of course be still further hurt by a long drop into the sub-basement.

Nick wanted to get at the man while he was in good shape—while he could talk of the events of the previous night.

He might die in the foul place to which he had been ticketed before Nick could learn what he wanted to know.

But there was a way to avoid this.

A long board lay on one of the packing boxes, and the detective took this and carried it to the shaft.

"I'll switch the victim off their trunk line to death or insanity," thought Nick, "if my usual luck will hold for a few minutes."

The board was wide as well as long, and perfectly smooth on one side. Bracing one end against the wall of the shaft opposite the door, the detective placed the other against a heavy box which he dragged up to the dark doorway.

"Now, my cunning friends," he mused, "your sailor will strike this slanting board when you dump him into the shaft and be shunted into this basement. I hope they will dump him in without throwing a flash of light into the shaft. That might spoil everything, as it would disclose the presence of the board and might make it necessary for me to do a little shooting. If I stand here and catch the fellow when he slides down my home-made switch, there will be no danger of losing him, or of his being injured by bumping against this solid floor."

Satisfied as to the utility of his plan, the detective stood in the open doorway and waited. Before long he heard a sound at the trapdoor above, and a gleam of light appeared. Nick almost held his breath. If they should take a notion to look down the shaft, his plans would be ruined. But they did not. It was a grewsome place at best, and the associations were probably far from pleasant, so they just lifted the trap in the floor above and threw the sailor down.

Nick knew by the movements above, plainly heard as being directly over his head, that the man had been taken from the rear room to the hall and there disposed of. It was pitch dark in the basement, so those above could not see that the door was open.

In a second the unconscious man came tumbling down, and Nick stood ready to direct the fall into the basement where he stood. The man struck the plank, which gave a trifle under the weight, and slid swiftly toward the door. There was not room on either side of the plank to fall off.

"This is great business for the heart of New York City," thought Nick, as he caught the sailor in his arms, "and reads like a story of old Spain, where dungeons and secret stairways are said to abound. Now, I wonder how badly this man is injured?"

He flashed a gleam from his lantern on the man's face, which was covered with blood, and saw that the

eyes were opening. Then he produced a small bottle of brandy and poured a liberal quantity down the sailor's throat.

As the strong stuff crept into the man's blood he raised his head and tried to speak. The detective lifted him higher and bent his ear to catch the sound.

"There was no killin'," the man said.

"But the man up there is dead," whispered Nick in the man's ear. "Who did the killing?"

"We did not," was the faint reply.

"Where did you get the diamonds?" asked Nick, seeing that the man had been fatally wounded by the savage blow of the bully and could not last much longer.

"We watched an' got them from——"

That was all. It was only a dead man that lay in the detective's arms. The sailor had died with the secret on his lips—when one more word would have set everything straight.

There was now but one thing for the detective to do, and that was to reach Patsy and the other sailor and take the latter into custody. He was guilty only of robbery, and might be induced to tell the truth by promises of leniency. Besides, he would doubtless be greatly enraged at the murder of his companion, and this might cause him to relate not only the events of the night at the Maynard house, but also the deal with Hartley. For the murder of the sailor, Hartley and the bully could be called to account later.

Nick ascended the stairs to the rear room, listened at the door, opened it a trifle, and looked inside. There was no one there, and the only light came through a transom over the door leading to the store. Crossing the room softly, Nick came to a door opening into the hall. It was through this doorway that the sailor had been carried on the way to the shaft.

Nick lifted the trap and looked down. All was dark and still below, and a swirl of foul air came up into his face. His lantern showed the board to be in position.

"I came near making a blunder there," he mused. "If they see that they will know that their secret is known and flee. I must go back."

The detective hastened to the basement, returned the board to the place from which it had been taken, and arranged the body so as to give the impression that it had fallen through the doorway instead of proceeding down the shaft. Then he opened a door leading to the sub-basement, left the door to the store floor open, and passed on to the hall again.

"They will never suspect that the sailor did not fall into the first basement," he thought, "and they may believe that I found my way out of the place where they dumped me, or thought they dumped me. However, we must get the bully under lock and key as soon as possible. It is the electric chair for him. Hartley must be watched until we know more about the diamond deal."

At the rear of the hall in which Nick now found himself a staircase led to the second floor. As Nick started to ascend it in the darkness a man came rushing down and almost fell over him. Nick quickly stepped aside and the fellow, who was panting as from a long run or a struggle, passed on to the door of the rear room and entered.

While Nick waited, wondering if it was now safe to attempt the ascent of the stairs, there was a rush of feet in the store in front and angry voices came to the ears of the listener.

"I tell you he came in here," Nick heard a voice say. "You've hidden him somewhere."

"Some street row," thought Nick.

All was still on the second floor when Nick reached the head of the stairs, and in a moment he was in the street. About the first person he saw there was Patsy. There was an excited crowd in front of the store, and policemen were guarding the door.

"What is it?" asked Nick.

"They did up my sailor," was the reply. "Where is your man?"

"Dead," was the reply. "And yours?"

"Gone to the hospital with a smash on the head that would have killed an ox," was the reply. "I don't think he'll ever get over it."

"How did it happen?" asked Nick.

"Well, we got tired of waiting for you and came and stood in front of the shop, here. Presently a tough mug of a fellow came out and looked us over. Then he went back and whispered with the clerk, and a gray-haired man was called into the conversation. We could see them through the window, and noted that they were all very much excited."

Nick began to understand.

"Then the tough mug came out and began picking a quarrel with us. The sailor was drunk and made a dash at him. He got a thump on the head that will hold him for a long time, I reckon, and then the tough came at me. I gave him one in the eye and he turned and ran away. I think he went up the stairway, but the mob says he went into the store."

"He is probably cursing the clerk good and plenty by this time," said Nick. "I figure it out that the

clerk thought he dumped the other sailor's partner when he dumped me, and so imagined that both were provided for. Then, when the bully saw the other one on the street with you he understood that something must be done, for he knew too much about the diamond deal and would be making inquiries for his partner, who had entered this place not long before."

"And his partner is dead?" asked Patsy.

"Dead down there in the cellar," said Nick.

"And the bully thought that both parties to the diamond deal were down there, all safe and beyond the power of harm?"

"That is about it."

"Well," said Patsy, "if one is dead the rascals are safe for a time, all right, for the other will not be out of the hospital for a long time, and may not know his own name when he does come out. He got a fierce smash on the front of the head."

"It was evidently the purpose to craze the man," said Nick. "That seems to be a cheerful way these fellows have. Well, this leaves us in bad shape. I know now that the two sailors took the diamonds from the Maynard house, but I don't know where the diamonds are any more than I did an hour ago. Again, these men might have thrown some light on the murder of Alvin Maynard. That is now impossible, for one is dead and the other may never regain his senses."

"This man Hartley seems to be playing a close game," said Patsy. "Dumped you, did they?"

Nick explained very briefly what had taken place in Hartley's establishment.

"So the diamonds are actually lost?" asked Patsy.

"It seems so," was the reply. "The sailors got them, in what manner I hope soon to learn, and turned them over to the agent. The agent put them in his trunk in their presence and checked them to New York. When the trunk got to Hartley's the diamonds were gone and a counterfeit package lay in the trunk. And it seems that both the sailor and the agent went to Hartley for their pay, which they would not have done if they had played him false. It is a great mix-up, and the finding of the men who took the diamonds from the house seems to have little bearing on the finding of the man who killed Alvin Maynard."

"There must be some common sense solution," said Patsy.

"I have thought," said Nick, "that the sailors took from the house a package supposed to contain the diamonds, but I can't imagine them traveling to the station and turning over what they had to the agent without knowing whether they had the gems or not. They would not trust to appearances—such men never do."

"Chick may learn something up at the Maynard house," suggested Patsy.

"In the meantime," said Nick, "we ought to get our hand on that bully and lock him up. He'll sit in the iron chair all right. But this should be done without letting Hartley know that he has been arrested. Now, I am going up to the Maynard house to-night, and I want you to manage the arrest of the bully. String a line of men around the whole block, if necessary, but *get him!* I'll be back in the morning. And, when you arrest the fellow, don't let him communicate with anyone. Hartley would make a jump for liberty that might give us a long chase."

It was eight o'clock when the detective left a train at the little suburban railroad station. Chick stood on the platform waiting for him.

"What's the news?" asked the chief.

"Unless I am much mistaken," was the reply, "the diamonds are still about the house. If they are not, there is a lot of lunatics up there."

"For instance?"

"Well, Mrs. Maynard seems to have recovered from her fits. At any rate she sits in the parlor and watches Anton every minute of the time. If he goes to his room, she makes an errand upstairs. If he goes out into the grounds she is not far away."

"Go on," said Nick.

"And Anton seems to be keeping his eye on the maid, Bernice. He goes where she is as often as he decently can, and once I heard them quarreling in the shrubbery."

"Then you think Mrs. Maynard suspects Anton?"

"I don't know if she suspects him of the robbery and the murder, but I believe she thinks he knows all about the events of that night. You know she was about the house herself, and took the diamonds from the trunk."

"That is the way we figured it out this morning," said Nick, thinking of the girl Anton had inquired for at the depot.

"I guess that is settled," said Chick.

"Nothing is settled until the case is ended," replied Nick. "For instance, you speak of the diamonds being here in the house at this moment. What if I tell you that I heard a man admit taking them and turning them over to one of Hartley's agents?"

"Is that a fact?" asked Chick, in surprise.

Nick then related, in brief, the story of the afternoon's work.

"Here is the mystery," said Chick. "How did the men get the diamonds? They did not penetrate the house further than the west room. Who gave them the gems, then? And who killed Alvin Maynard? Again, the burglars were not in a position to do it! They never got to that front room. Were there two sets of criminals in the house last night, each acting with a different purpose in view?"

Nick smiled but attempted no explanation.

He had, his own notion about things, but he was not ready to tell the story of the crime, even to his assistant.

The detectives were now walking side by side under the orchard trees, perhaps fifty yards back of the house. They had followed the track taken in the morning.

It was a moonlight night, but there were heavy banks of clouds in the sky, and now and then the landscape was in darkness.

"Here we are at the path leading to the house," said Nick, "and we may as well find out what Charley Maynard is thinking of. How does he take the loss of his diamonds now that the excitement has worn off?"

"Like the sensible fellow that he is," was the reply. "And it has been discovered that he is not broke if he never gets the diamonds. He was Alvin's favorite, and the old man was rich. Charley gets a couple of millions."

"Then he can well afford to take the matter coolly," said Nick, "for——"

But the sentence was never finished.

Two revolver shots came from a thicket in the orchard.

Then, in the moonlight, two spiral puffs of smoke crept upward.

It was a close call, but the bullets did no harm.

CHAPTER VII.

AT FOUR O'CLOCK.

"That was going some," said Chick, coolly.

Nick did not wait to make reply. He rushed the thicket whence the shots had come, but arrived too late to find the would-be murderer there. When Chick reached the spot, he found his chief down on his knees examining the earth, lantern in hand.

As the assistant came up Nick closed the slide of the lantern and moved away from the spot.

"Now," said Chick, "that shows that there are people about here who are implicated in the happenings of last night. They evidently think we are getting too inquisitive."

Nick walked on toward the house without making reply. He was thinking fast. Once more his clues were pointing in a contrary direction.

"Those shots were intended to defend the murderer and not the diamond thief," he mused. "Now, I wonder if the people up here have fallen into my trap?"

Arrived at the house, Nick and Chick, after a moment's conversation with Mrs. Maynard and Charley, proceeded to the second floor of the mansion. Nick stopped at the head of the stairs with a smile on his face. The stairs and the halls had been swept and washed during the day, thus removing every trace of the record left by naked feet the night before.

Nick hastened to the closet in Anton's room. When he came out again the smile on his face had broadened. His next move was to visit the hallway used by the servants in reaching the rooms over the main part of the house. This, too, had been cleaned, and tiny marks which Nick had observed on the door in the morning had been obliterated. In one place the paint had been partially rubbed from the door casing in scrubbing off a stain. The detective turned toward the lower part of the house.

"The case up here is closed," he said.

Chick opened his eyes but said nothing.

Nick went to the back end of the house and asked for Bernice.

"She's gone," said one of the servants.

"Gone where?"

"To the city," was the reply.

Nick smiled and turned away. He remembered distinctly of having caught a glimpse of the girl at one of the upper windows just before entering the orchard, perhaps five minutes before the shooting.

"She went away two hours ago," said the servant, a young girl who seemed devoted to the maid. "I saw her take the train."

Nick thought he knew why the girl had been hiding in the house, and why she had instructed the servant to tell of her departure. He turned to his assistant.

"Bernice may try to take the next train," he said. "Now, I want to talk with her before she gets off, and I wish you would watch the depot and see that she remains here at least until morning."

"But she has already gone," said Chick.

"You may find her hiding about the station," said Nick. "The girl is frightened half to death. Anton thinks she has the diamonds."

"I don't understand," said Chick, but Nick would talk no more, so the assistant set out to the depot.

Nick then asked for Mrs. Maynard, and together they ascended to the maid's room. The old lady was trembling violently, and it was with difficulty that Nick got her into the room. What took place there will never be known, but the results of the interview were far-reaching.

"Where is Bernice?" asked the old lady, at the close of the talk.

"She is waiting to get to New York," was the reply.

"Yes, she asked permission to go, sometime in the afternoon," said the old lady, "and it was granted. The poor girl is half crazed."

Nick smiled and escorted Mrs. Maynard back to the parlor.

"The case is clearing," he thought. "If I only had a line on the whereabouts of the diamonds!"

At this moment Charley Maynard entered the parlor, which Nick was about to leave.

"There are strange doings about here," he said. "Who did the shooting?"

"All in good time," said Nick. "There is little use in discussing suspicions."

"Do you think the diamonds are still in this house?" asked the young man.

"I know that they are not," was the reply.

In a few words Nick explained the events of the afternoon in the city. Charley gave an exclamation of vexation.

"If the sailors stole the diamonds," he said, "and gave them to the agent, and some one unknown and untraceable stole them from the agent, what chance do I have of ever getting them back? If the sailors, who were in the house for a felonious purpose, did not murder my uncle, who did? I think we are further from the end of the case than when we began."

"If I have my usual luck," replied Nick, "you shall hear the end of the case before another sunrise."

"Then you must know exactly what you are doing," said Charley. "I am sure that no one else does."

"Right you are," replied Nick. "There is one chance in two that I have located the diamonds. Be patient until the time for the disclosure comes."

Charley went grumbling off to his room, and Nick sat on the porch or wandered about in the moonlight until three o'clock. Then he went toward the station, taking a round-about path. He had heard nothing from Chick since he had left the house early in the evening.

The detective did not go straight to the station, but stopped in a thicket of evergreens that bordered a fence not far from the little railroad house. From his hiding place he had a full view of the back of the building, and also of the window of the little store under which so many things had taken place the night before. As Nick lay down to await the arrival of the train Chick crept up and laid a hand on his arm.

"I saw you coming," he said. "What's new up at the house?"

"The end of the case lies here," said Nick. "We have done with the house end of the murder and the robbery."

"Well, you've got me guessing," said Chick.

"Did the maid show up?" asked Nick.

"She's hanging about in the shrubbery somewhere. Why should she do that?"

"She's afraid she'll be arrested for doing the shooting, and for other things," said Nick.

"That pretty child do the shooting!" said Chick. "Impossible!"

"Don't form conclusions already," said Nick.

"It appears to me that you are doing that very thing," said Chick.

"The girl hasn't seen you, has she?" asked Nick.

"I think not. I have not been out in the open, and she has usually been between me and the station. She's shy of being seen, I can tell you that."

"Now," said Nick, "the train is coming. Move down to the front, keeping out of sight, and get where you can see the whole length of the line of cars. If a man gets off, you follow him, but keep out of sight. If I point to any person who gets off and on the train jump aboard and arrest him before the arrival at New York."

"If the girl joins him?" asked Chick. "I presume that is what all this means."

"The girl will not join him," was the reply. "She may try to, but she will not succeed."

"Who is this man?" asked Chick.

Nick laughed.

"To be honest with you," he said, "I don't know that there is any man. The girl may be waiting here to sneak away on the train, though it seems strange that she would wait until this hour, when early trains stop here. A girl met a man here last night, and she may meet him again to-night. It looks to me as if that girl was Bernice. We shall soon know if I have doped the case wrong. Here comes the train."

Chick glided through the shrubbery and came out at the front of the locomotive, keeping under the head-

light. By moving about a little he could see along both sides of the line of cars. Presently he saw a man step off the smoking car platform, on the side opposite the station. He dodged the lighted windows and ducked away to the right, where a patch of bushes hid a view of the field beyond. Chick was not far behind him. He was wondering if Nick was prepared for this, but in a moment he understood.

Bernice came out of the copse to meet the man, and a rustle of bushes off to the right told Chick that his chief was there, observing the interview.

Chick could not get near enough to hear what was being said, but it looked to him as if Nick was better placed. As the starting bell rang Chick saw the man take something from his purse and pass it over to Bernice.

Then the man moved toward the train, with the girl facing in the same direction.

Chick then saw his chief rise up out of the bushes and point to the man who was making for the train. As the fellow sprang upon the lighted platform Chick mounted the steps of the now moving train and took a seat in the smoker. He was bound to obey orders, though he knew little of the significance of his own actions.

As the train moved off Bernice skirted the station building and started off toward the house at a swift walk. Nick, who had heard considerable of the girl's talk with the man, followed close behind her.

Arriving on the house grounds, she passed around to the kitchen door, which was opened at her knock. Some one had evidently been waiting for her. Nick moved up to a window and looked in. The servant girl he had before talked with stood in front of the maid, a lighted lamp in her hand. The maid's hand bag lay on a table between them.

As Nick waited, the girls moved into the pantry, as if to get a luncheon, and Nick hastened back to the door, which he found unfastened.

The lamp was still in the pantry when the detective opened the outer door and looked into the kitchen. He crept in, seized the handbag and hastened out again.

Stationing himself at the window again, Nick saw the girls leave the pantry.

"I thought I heard a noise out here," said Bernice.

"It was the wind," said the girl, offering the usual threadbare explanation.

Bernice approached the table.

"Where is my hand bag?" she asked.

"I haven't got it," was the reply.

"You saw me lay it here?"

"Yes."

"Some one has stolen it," said the maid, terror showing in her face. "Have you seen Anton about here to-night?"

"He has not been here," was the reply. "Do you think he would steal it?"

"I am sure of it," replied the maid. "Oh, what shall I do? It means ruin to lose that hand bag now!"

"You can buy another," said the girl, stupidly.

"But the contents!" cried the maid. "I can't replace them!"

"Shall I go to Anton's room and see if he is there?" asked the girl.

"Yes—no! Oh, what shall I do? Perhaps I had better go myself."

Bernice moved away, followed by the servant, and Nick opened the kitchen door again and entered. He followed the girls through the dining room into a hall from which ran the stairs connecting with the servant's hall on the second floor.

Bernice mounted the stairs and soon stood at the door which opened into the main hall which ran in front of the room where the murder had been committed.

"I can't bear to go in there," Nick heard her whisper.

"The body is not there," said the servant. "It is in the large room back of the library and the watchers are there with it."

Bernice opened the door and started in. Then she shrank back and said to the girl. "You go, Nancy, and see if there is a light in Anton's room."

The girl returned presently and said that there was a light there.

"Then you remain here," said Bernice, "and I'll go and see him. Don't you stir until I return. Oh, what shall I do?"

Nick heard the girl sobbing convulsively for a moment after she was left alone.

Nick waited no longer.

He advanced to where the girl stood, lamp in hand, and said:

"Go and awake you mistress and ask her to come to the parlor."

"But I was told to remain here," said the loyal servant.

"Bernice will be down in a moment," said Nick.

As he spoke the door of Anton's room opened and the young man and the maid looked out.

"What's wanted?" asked Anton.

"You are wanted in the parlor, both of you," replied Nick. "Go on, little girl, and tell your mistress to come."

"What does this mean?" asked Bernice.

"Come to the parlor and find out," replied Nick, stepping to the door of the room occupied by Charley and knocking on the panels.

"Wake up, Charley," he cried, "and come to the parlor. Your diamonds have been found. Oh, you are dressed!" added Nick, opening the door. "I thought you went to bed to get some sleep!"

"Sleep!" cried the young man, "I have been watching that door all night!"

He pointed to Anton's door.

"You have?" cried Anton. "Why should you watch my door?"

"Never mind that," said Nick. "The truth is out, and the story will be told in the parlor. You watched the wrong door, Charley."

A few moments later an interesting group assembled in the great parlor of the Maynard country house. Mrs. Maynard, Bernice, the small servant girl, Charley Maynard, and Anton, with the detective, constituted the party.

Bernice was deadly pale. Her eyes glared strangely about the room, and her hands trembled violently. Anton took a chair at her side and seemed anxious to restore her self-command.

Mrs. Maynard looked with averted eyes at the couple. Charley was cool as usual, but his eyes were fixed reprovingly on the maid.

"You stated that the diamonds had been found," he said, turning to Nick. "I have suspected all along that they never left the house."

"Is that the reason why you watched Anton's door to-night?" asked Nick.

"It is," was the reply.

Anton sprang excitedly to his feet.

"Remain quiet," said Nick. "There is no need of temper here."

"The coward!" cried Anton. "To insult me here in the presence of my mother!"

"You were wrong in supposing that the diamonds were in the house," said Nick, to Charley. "They were removed by two burglars last night, and are now in New York."

"Have the burglars been caught?" asked Anton, eagerly.

"They have," was the reply.

"And have confessed?" asked Charley.

Anton sank back in his chair like a man in a fit.

"I don't believe it," declared Bernice.

"Where are the diamonds located?" asked Charley.

Nick opened his pocketbook and took out a key to which was attached a brass tag.

"You stole my hand bag!" shouted Bernice.

Nick looked up with a smile on his face.

"One thing at a time," he said. "Your diamonds, Charley, are now located in deposit vaults on Broadway, in box number three thousand eight hundred and seventy-nine, and this is the key thereof."

Bernice looked like a girl about to commit murder.

"You thief!" she cried. "You stole my hand bag!"

"Yes," replied Nick, "I did steal your hand bag. It is down in the kitchen, behind the range. I have no further use for it."

"Did you get this key from her hand bag?" demanded Charley.

Nick nodded.

"Then she stole the diamonds," said Charley.

"You are wrong," said the detective. "She did not steal the diamonds, but she was prepared to do so, and she concealed all knowledge of their whereabouts, for she knew this morning where they were."

"It is false!" shouted Bernice. "Do you get us all up in the night to tell us of these things. It is all a lie!"

"You will be claiming, presently," said Anton, "that I murdered Alvin Maynard."

"You did," said Nick, coolly.

Again Anton sprang to his feet, but Nick lifted the muzzle of a revolver to his breast and he sat down again.

Mrs. Maynard bowed her head and sobbed audibly. Charley moved nearer to the accused man. Bernice stared like one under a spell, first at Mrs. Maynard and then at Anton, who sat with his eyes fixed reproachfully on his mother.

Nick understood the meaning of that look and said:

"Don't blame your mother. I knew the truth before she confessed to the scene in the dead man's room last night."

"You are a devil," cried Bernice. "If I had only shot straight."

"It would have been better for you if you had not shot at all," said Nick, "for that was what made me certain of your complicity in the diamond robbery."

"You lie! You lie! I know nothing about it," shouted the girl.

"Wait," said Nick, coolly, "and I will tell the story of the robbery and the murder."

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW IT WAS DONE.

"When the news that the diamonds were coming reached the house," began Nick, "Anton being without money and in debt, began figuring how the inheritance of his cousin by marriage could best be put to his own advantage."

"That is a lie!" roared Anton.

"If you interrupt me again," said Nick, "I'll put the handcuffs on you. You, Anton, even went so far in your envious plotting as to speak to your mother about the diamonds being divided. Charley, you said, would not miss a few, and it would be the means of saving you from disgrace. Your mother resented the imputation on her honesty, and resolved to see that the diamonds, when they arrived, should be protected from thievery.

"The diamonds came and Anton's plans were not perfected. He wanted to keep his skirts clean, yet he wanted to profit by the inheritance of his friend. On the night the diamonds arrived Anton remained downstairs long after the others were in their rooms—all except Bernice. He did not tell me the truth when he said that he was almost the first one on the second floor that night.

"Seeing that whatever was done must be done at once, Anton that night confided his plans to Bernice, proposing that he get the diamonds and that she dispose of them in a way yet to be arranged. Bernice consented, and Anton went to his room to watch for a chance to steal the diamonds. In the meantime, Charley had been given a sleeping potion in his lemonade. This was done by Anton doctoring up his own and deftly changing glasses. The substitution was witnessed by Mrs. Maynard, who then began to fear not only for the safety of the gems but also for the future of her son.

"Anton went to his room late, after arranging the details of the robbery with Bernice, and sat by his door in undress, waiting for the house to become quiet. While he sat there he heard his mother leave her room and cross the hall to the apartment where the diamonds were, and where the owner was sound asleep, with the gems unprotected in an old trunk which was not even locked. Alarmed at the thought of what might take place, Mrs. Maynard had decided to herself take charge of the diamonds for the night. Too loyal to her son to betray him, and thus put Charley on his guard, she resolved to risk her own reputation for honesty in defending the property.

"After a time Mrs. Maynard recrossed the hall to her own room, leaving her son in a frame of mind little short of desperation. All his plans had failed! Then it was that he heard the door of his stepfather's room open. The old man, feeling that something unusual was going on, had watched the hall, and had heard his wife enter and leave Charley's room. That day the mother had pleaded with her husband in the interest of her spendthrift son, and had been refused the money favor she asked.

"It was natural, then, that the old man should believe that his wife had become a midnight thief in order to provide her son with money. After Mrs. Maynard returned to her room Mr. Maynard went there, light in hand, and in no gentle frame of mind. He found the diamonds where his wife had placed them, in a little drawer of her dresser, accused her of stealing them, refused to listen to any explanation, and carried the gems off to his own room."

"You are an evil spirit!" gasped Bernice. "You have eyes in this house when you are away in New York."

"Mrs. Maynard followed her husband on his return to his room," continued Nick. "There she resented his charges, explained her purpose in taking the diamonds, and demanded their return to her custody. But she had asked for money for her son that day, and Mr. Maynard would not listen to her story. He believed that she had stolen the gems for the purpose of enriching her son at the expense of the nephew.

"After a time the woman tried to take the diamonds by force, and a struggle took place, during which she was thrown to the floor, her head striking on the corner of the lounge and receiving the wound which she afterward ascribed to a blow from the burglar. Anton, who was watching and listening in the hall, heard the fall and entered the room just in time to see Mr. Maynard bending over his mother in a threatening attitude.

"Just before leaving his room he had used a geologist's hammer in fixing a box in which he proposed to hide and ship the diamonds. Unconsciously he carried this hammer in his hand when he entered the front room. Seeing his mother insensible on the floor and Mr. Maynard bending over her in an angry attitude, the young man had every right to believe that he was acting for the best when he bounded forward and struck the man a violent blow on the head. Mr. Maynard fell dead.

"Alarmed at what he had done, the young man

hastened to place the body on the bed and apply restoratives, but it was too late. He then revived his mother and carried her back to her room.

"While all these events had been going on, Bernice had been waiting at the end of the hall leading to the servants' quarters. She was expecting that Anton would eventually bring her the box containing the diamonds. When Mr. Maynard fell dead Anton took the diamonds to his room, after a distressing interview with his mother, who was inconsolable at the death of her husband, whose last words to her had been words of anger and reproach. The mother protested without avail against the larceny of the gems. Anton was determined to profit by the events of the night.

"Anton carried the diamonds to his room and secreted them in a box in the closet. The geologist's hammer with which the murder had been committed was placed on a shelf in the same closet, after being cleared from the marks of the blow by wiping it on a towel which hung in the closet. This hammer has a break on one side of the striking surface, and this shows in the wound on the dead man."

"Is all this necessary?" asked the mother, greatly distressed at the details of the killing of her husband.

"It seems to be," was the reply. "When Anton closed his door, Bernice crept down the hall and listened. She waited there until the young man's light was extinguished, then she realized that it was not his intention to trust her with the diamonds. You see, Anton had doubtless decided to deny everything, not knowing that the girl had been a witness of the murder.

"Then the burglars came. They had followed the diamonds from New York, and would have entered the house earlier only that they understood that something unusual was in progress on the inside. During the absence of Anton in his stepfather's room they had raised a ladder to a window of his room. One of them had looked through the window while Anton gloated over the diamonds.

"When the young man went to bed the burglars entered the room, not knowing that Bernice was watching at the door, of course. Anton was not sound asleep and sprang up at the noise they made. He was instantly grappled with and finally knocked down, though not rendered entirely unconscious, with a pair of iron knuckles. While he lay on the floor, fearing for his life, the men, who had seen him enter the closet with the diamonds, searched about and secured the gems.

"All this time Bernice was listening at the door, afraid to call out for fear of inviting her own death at the hands of the burglars, resolved not to leave her post of observation for the reason that she had not entirely given up the notion of securing the diamonds. She is a quick-witted girl, this French maid, and her brain was busy with a plan as she stood at the door in the dark hall.

"She regarded the arrival of the burglars as opportune. Their presence in the house would account for the murder and for the disappearance of the diamonds. Besides, she had a plan for securing the diamonds. When the burglars left Anton's room she darted through it and climbed down the ladder in pursuit. Anton, though not fully recovered, knew who it was that was passing through without stopping to offer assistance, and at once decided that Bernice was in league with the robbers and had brought them to the house.

"Bernice followed the burglars to the railroad station. Here they met a third man, the agent of a diamond merchant, and she saw the diamonds placed in charge of the third man, locked in a trunk, and finally checked for passage on the train. I am still at a loss to know why this was done, but I think the merchant considered the gems safer there than in the pocket of any one of the three men.

"Now, Bernice had a lover on the train which would carry the diamonds away, and that lover was no less a person than the baggageman in whose charge the diamonds were placed. When the train halted at the station she called him from his car, told him what was going on, and the two went to where the three men were still haggling over the disposition of the diamonds. On the way to New York this baggageman opened the trunk and stole the diamonds. The sailors believed that the agent stole them, the agent believed that the sailors gave him a counterfeit package, and Hartley, the merchant, sided with the agent. So you see it all made a pretty mess.

"Yesterday in New York," continued Nick, "the baggageman stored the diamonds in a deposit vault on Broadway and when the train came through here not long ago he handed the key to the box to Bernice. I have it here now."

"But the baggageman, he have escape!" cried Bernice. "I have nothing to do with it all! I am free—innocent!"

At that moment Nick was called to the telephone which connected the Maynard house with New York. Before leaving the room he turned to Anton and Bernice.

"I am going to leave you here," he said, "although both are under arrest. I don't know but you will try to escape. If you do it will be the worse for you both. Under the circumstances, if you behave well, I am inclined to be very lenient with you both. Will you remain here until I return?"

They both promised. For the first time since the opening of the story, a gleam of hope shone in Anton's eyes.

When Nick reached the phone he found Chick at the other end.

"I have the baggageman under arrest," said the assistant.

"What does he say?"

"He says that he did not know what the box contained."

"That may be true. Have you found out whether the diamonds are really in the vault?" asked Nick.

"It is impossible to locate the manager to-night," was the reply. "How are things at your end?"

"Everything lovely," was the reply. "Come out on the first train."

When Nick went back to the parlor he handed Charley the key to the safety box in the Broadway vaults.

"The baggageman is under arrest in New York," explained Nick. "Perhaps you had better go down on an early train and see if the diamonds are all right. He claims that he did not know what was in the box."

"He did not," said Bernice. "I was not the fool to tell him."

"You might have made a mistake in not doing so," said Nick, "for he might have left the package about in a careless manner. You have done several injudicious things in connection with this affair," added Nick. "When you watched us from the hall on the morning following the murder you attracted attention to yourself. When you came up and destroyed the footprints in the hall leading to the servants' rooms you made yourself an object of suspicion. When you shot at us from the thicket in the orchard you admitted, as plainly as words could have done, that you were deeply implicated in the robbery or the murder, or both. Under these circumstances it was natural that you should be followed to the station and your movements there noted. I saw the baggageman give you the key to the deposit box, and heard what you said to him. Your interview with him the night before was witnessed by the lunch man, although he could not hear what was said at that time. It was enough for me that you were there with him. So you see you, yourself, supplied the clues which led to the location of the gems."

"What are you going to do with me now?" demanded the girl.

"I have done my work in the case," replied the detective. "I have located the diamonds and I have discovered how Alvin Maynard came to his death. The case is now in the hands of the sheriff and the State's attorney."

"Remember your promise to me," interrupted Mrs. Maynard. "You promised not to be too hard on my son and Bernice if I told you what I knew of the affair."

"I shall recommend leniency," replied Nick, "but I knew all the facts before you told me your story. The geologist's hammer with which the blow was struck was found in Anton's closet yesterday morning, but I did not remove it. I was not certain at that time that it was the instrument of death. During my absence in New York the young man removed it, thus showing that he had an interest in concealing clues pointing to the murderer. Again, I learned on my first inspection of the closet that the stolen diamonds had for a time been secreted in a box in the closet. One of the gems had broken away from its fastening and was found in the box. The box and the diamond were also removed during my absence. Instead of covering up his tracks, the young man was only supplying more proof against himself. I think the burglars must have seen Anton carry the diamonds to the closet on his return from the front of the house, for they appeared to have found them with little trouble."

"Are you going to turn me over to the sheriff?" asked Anton, his face deadly pale, his lips quivering, his brain whirling at the contemplation of the case against him.

"I shall be obliged to do that," said Nick, "but I don't see how you can be convicted of murder, for you certainly had a right to strike when you believed your mother to be in peril. Bernice will be held as accessory after the fact only, for I shall not press the charge of attempted murder, though she might have killed Chick or myself. I shall be lenient for the sake of this poor old lady."

At this moment a knocking was heard at the door and Charley admitted the sheriff.

"I followed a false clue," he said to Nick. "What luck here?"

"The diamonds have been recovered in New York," replied Nick, "and the death of Mr. Maynard is no

longer a mystery. I have two prisoners here, Anton Sawtelle and Bernice. I ask you to take them into custody and keep them prisoners in this house until the State's attorney can be consulted."

The detective did not consider it necessary to tell the whole story to the sheriff, but the latter consented to do as requested. In a few moments the house was dark, and Nick slept soundly until eight o'clock in the morning, when he was awakened by Chick.

"How are things in New York?" asked the chief.

"Both Hartley and the bully murderer are under arrest," replied Chick, "and the sailor at the hospital is in a fair way to recover. He got a wicked blow, however."

"They have run their course," said Nick.

"The baggageman puts up the biggest yell," said Chick. "He says that he did not know that there had been a robbery, that he did not know that there were diamonds in the package, and that he only did a favor for Bernice."

"When baggagemen break open trunks as a favor to their sweethearts," said Nick, "it is time that they were called down."

"It was a pretty mess," said Chick. "The burglars seemed to happen along just in time to turn suspicion from members of the household. Anton and Bernice put up the job to get the diamonds, all right, but Mrs. Maynard unconsciously foiled them for the time being. If Maynard had slept soundly that night he would be alive now."

"I think Anton must be a bad sort of a chap," said Nick. "He would have robbed his friend of half a million."

"I'd like to know whether the baggageman put the diamonds in the safety box," said Chick, in a moment. "He might have opened the package, weakened at sight of so much wealth, and carried out the character of the case by putting a dummy package in the box."

"Well," replied Nick, "the man is under arrest, but, for all that, it would not be so easy to again locate the diamonds."

That morning the case was laid before the State's attorney and Anton and Bernice were taken to the county jail. Later, on recommendation of the detectives, they were given short terms for manslaughter and larceny, respectively.

The diamonds were found in the safety vault, and Charley recommended leniency in the case of the baggageman, who was charged with breaking baggage confided to his care. It proved to be the fact that he did not know what was in the trunk, and that he had been made to believe that Bernice had the right to have it opened.

The wounded sailor recovered, and was sentenced to one year in the penitentiary for breaking and entering. His sentence was made light because he testified willingly against Hartley. He said that they had followed the diamonds from South Africa, and had applied to Hartley for funds immediately upon their arrival in New York.

The one thing the sailor would not talk about was as to how they were able to interest Hartley in the venture in so short a time. They arrived on the vessel with the gems they were after, and in an hour's time they were working under the instructions of the diamond merchant.

This part of the case was a mystery to all. Nick Carter was abroad at the time of the trial and sentence. Hartley, too, remained silent on this one point, even after he had received a sentence at Sing Sing, and the bully had been sent to the electric chair for the murder done at the store.

"It was one of the strangest cases I ever handled," said Nick, after the matter was closed. "I came near getting a broken head there in the diamond store, but my usual luck protected me. There is one point, however, that I would like to see cleared up."

"About how the sailors and Hartley got together so quickly?"

"That's it. I have my suspicions, but they are vague."

"Has Charley Maynard disposed of his diamonds?" asked Chick.

"He has not," was the reply. "I wish he would," added the detective, soberly, "for it is not safe to have such a fortune in so small a parcel. The diamonds were followed from Africa. Who knows whether the leaders in the conspiracy have given up hope of securing them? Those sailors never put up that job."

"I think I understand what your suspicions are regarding the combination between Hartley and the sailors, made in an hour," said Chick.

"Well," said Nick, "it is the young man's own affair. I have advised him, but he only laughs at me."

"Past experiences should teach him better," said Chick," and so it would seem.

And the famous murder and diamond case was closed.

THE END.

The next number (647) will contain "The Great Diamond Syndicate, or Nick Carter's Cleverest Foes."

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"A risk? Oh, yes, there'll be a risk, of course. Is there not always danger when a band of revolutionaries gather together in secret, and at night? And there are Russian spies everywhere. They swarm in Poland. If you're afraid, don't go."

"I'm not afraid," returned Phil Trelawne; "but as my father is attached to the Embassy at St. Petersburg, I don't think he'd care to know that I attended a meeting of Polish patriots."

Sigismund Majovice laughed.

"You would not go as Phil Trelawne," he said. "That wouldn't do at all. You must assume a Polish name; and when I give you the password you will be admitted with me, and will see all the great revolutionary leaders and will hear them speak. One day, if trouble comes to Russia, if ever there is a great revolution as there was in France, these men will be the St. Justs and the Robespierres of the Polish rising."

"I hope they will not prove so bloodthirsty as St. Just and Robespierre," answered Phil. "But I am anxious to hear them, Sigismund; and so long as my real name is not disclosed I don't mind the risk."

"Then we'll go together," said his friend. "The time is twelve to-night, and while the ball at Casimer is in full swing."

Phil had come to St. Petersburg, where he had spent his Christmas with his father; and now was visiting Sigismund Majovice, who lived with his uncle, the count, at an old castle a few miles from Warsaw, and near the town of Casimer, which was supposed to be a hotbed of revolutionaries hostile to the Russian Government. The count had married a sister of Colonel Trelawne, who looked with an unsympathetic eye on the wild hopes of his Polish kinsman, but who had made no objection to Phil spending part of his holiday at the castle.

"Shoot and hunt as much as you like, Phil," he had said, "but remember that you are the son of an attaché connected with the embassy; and therefore you must be careful what you say. The count is a moujuan when he gets upon this revolution topic, and I'm afraid Sigismund is just as rash. One day the Russian Government will catch them in some plot, and then off they go to Siberia."

Phil remembered all this as he and Sigismund, dressed in furs, for the night was bitterly cold, drove into Casimer in a sleigh drawn by two horses.

There had been trouble in Warsaw, so that most of the Russian police and soldiers had been drafted from Casimer to the Polish capital, leaving the smaller town practically unpatrolled, and giving the revolutionaries a rare chance to hold a great secret meeting without much fear of interruption or discovery.

A well-known Polish gentleman—a friend of the count's—was giving a ball, which was but a mask to hide the real purpose of the gathering; for while the ball was in progress the revolutionary leaders intended to adjourn to an underground room and discuss the chances of a far-reaching plot against Russia.

Count Majovice had gone to Casimer earlier in the evening to confer with some of his friends, and when Phil and Sigismund reached the town, the former began to regret that he had promised to accompany his cousin to the midnight conspiracy. For on reflection he felt that his father would disapprove strongly; and the entry of Russian police or soldiers would mean his arrest and exposure, in company with the Polish revolutionaries. He decided, therefore, to keep clear of the gathering, and told Sigismund so.

The young Pole smiled sarcastically.

"Ah! very well; if you are afraid, don't go," he said.

"I'm not afraid," returned Phil. "But I have told you that my father wouldn't like it."

Sigismund shook his head.

"A very good excuse," he sneered. "Are all Americans timid, like you?"

A dark flush came to Phil Trelawne's cheek.

"You know that I'm no coward," he said quietly.

"I don't," returned Sigismund. "Still, it doesn't matter. Stay in the ballroom, if you like, while I'm at the meeting."

"No," said Phil, "I'll go with you."

"Why?" answered the young Pole in astonishment.

"Because you called me a coward," returned Phil.

Sigismund made no reply, and having put up their horses at an inn, they made their way to the house where the ball was to be held.

Phil Trelawne was boiling with rage. He felt angry with himself and angry with Sigismund. He would, he realized, have shown more true courage had he stuck to his guns and refused to accompany his cousin to the conspiracy; but his pride had got the better of his reason, and he meant now to see the matter through.

Snow had fallen lightly, but the air was clear and frosty. The town looked very beautiful, bathed as it was in brilliant moonlight and with the stars glittering in their splendor overhead. The streets seemed quite deserted, but just ere the boys reached their destination a Cossack jingled past them on a little quick-trotting horse. He was armed to the teeth, and carried a heavy whip in his hand, which he cracked like a pistol shot as he rode along.

"So there are some soldiers left in Casimer," remarked Phil.

"They won't interfere," was the reply. "And the police can have no pretext for disturbing a ball given by a Polish gentleman to his friends. He can't be expected to invite Russian officers. Here we are at last."

They went up the steps of the portico, entered the large hall, divested themselves of their furs, and finally were ushered into the ballroom.

There the lilt of music mingled with the murmur of voices and the light tapping of many heels. Dancing had already commenced, and Sigismund, having introduced Phil to their hostess, quickly found a partner. So also did the young American, and he vastly enjoyed himself until close upon midnight, when, in the interval, the men withdrew first to a smoking room, and then went swiftly below and entered a dim apartment, giving the password, one by one, to their host, who stood by the door.

Sigismund put his lips to Phil's ear.

"You are Stanislaus Vilitza to-night," he whispered. The password is 'Kosciusko.'"

They were admitted; soon the door was closed, and Count Majovice began to speak.

His passionate harangue raised the conspirators to enthusiasm, there were subdued outbursts of applause; and afterward came other speeches, equally red-hot and hostile to the Government. It was hoped that a rising throughout Russia would herald a cry to arms in Poland, a rising so vast that even the army would be tempted to come over to the revolutionary side. And if that happened, success was assured. The old merciless *régime* would go for ever, and a new era would dawn.

Hark! What was that?

"Open! By order of the Czar!"

A loud knocking had sounded on the door, and above, in the ballroom, silence had fallen. The music had ceased; the voices were still; then again came the hoarse summons:

"Open! By order of the Czar!"

"This way!" whispered Count Majovice. "There is a secret exit here! Be swift! You will go through a dark passage and finally find yourself behind the house. After that you must escape as best you can!"

"Come on!" said Sigismund.

"There are old men here. Let them go first!" answered Phil Trelawne.

"But we shall be caught. Look, they are all pressing toward that little secret door."

"All right. Escape while you can," said Phil. Sigismund stared wildly at him.

"Are you mad?" he whispered. "When the soldiers enter we shall be arrested. We shall be sent to Siberia."

Phil laughed recklessly.

"Well, I'm not going to stampede. I'm not going to shove old men aside or trample on 'em so that I can get out first. I'm not a coward!" he said.

With a bitter word Sigismund left him and began to struggle toward the exit.

The large door was being battered down. Soldiers were hammering upon it with their rifle butts. Presently it was bound to fall. Still Phil Trelawne waited patiently, biding his time.

Nearly all the conspirators, including the count and Sigismund, had made good their escape, unless police and soldiers surrounded the mansion, in which case all would probably be arrested; and suddenly the small secret door, which was of iron, closed with a bang, either by accident or design, entrapping three Polish gentlemen and Phil Trelawne, for at that instant the large door fell and the soldiers poured into the room.

"In the Czar's name! We arrest you all!" cried an officer.

There was a sharp report, and with a dull groan the Russian flung up his arms and fell dead. One of the Poles had fired a pistol and killed him. In an instant Phil flung himself upon his face, and well he did, for a volley had answered the shot, and the three Poles fell lifeless. The room was so dimly lighted that the eyes of the soldiers could not search its recesses, and to make sure of their prey they fired again. Phil heard the bullets thudding against the walls; then he leaped up and made a dash for the door.

A soldier jabbed at him with a bayonet, but he slipped aside, and, lowering his head, drove right in among them in a desperate effort to break through and escape. But in vain. Crash! came a rifle butt on his head, and down he went.

When he recovered his senses he was lying in the deserted ballroom, surrounded by a score of soldiers and half a dozen police. Every conspirator had escaped except himself and the three unfortunates who had been shot, and on striving to rise Phil realized that his hands were bound; while an officer, with a brutal laugh, gave him a kick which sent him once more upon his back.

"Lie there, dog!" he cried, cooly lighting a cigarette. "Now tell me your name."

Phil Trelawne hesitated. He thought of his father. What, he wondered, would be the consequences were it known that the son of the American colonel, who was one of the military attachés to the embassy, had been caught red-handed, as it were, at a gathering of Polish conspirators, especially when one of those conspirators was the colonel's relative? Might not his father be suspected of secret sympathy with the revolutionaries? If so, Russia would do her best to ruin him and insist on his recall.

"Your name?" again demanded the officer.

"Stanislaus Vilitza," said Phil, who spoke Russian fluently.

"Who are those men who were shot? Who was he who killed my senior officer?"

"I do not know."

"Give me the names of all the conspirators who escaped!"

Phil made no reply.

"Do you hear me?" cried the officer, and, bending over Phil Trelawne, the brutal soldier pressed the burning end of his cigarette against the boy's cheek. But Phil was silent.

"We must try stronger means," reflected the officer. "Where is your whip?" he continued, turning to a Cossack.

But one of the police interfered.

"It is better he should be taken to the chief of police at Warsaw," he said. "I will have a sleigh brought to the door, and he can be driven there at once."

"Very good," returned the officer, giving Phil a parting kick. "But I think I could have made the young dog speak. Bring him along, men!"

Phil was dragged from the room, down the wide stair, and out into the frosty night. Presently a sleigh, drawn by a couple of fine horses, came to the portico. Phil was heaved in among some straw—a Russian policeman sat beside him, and called upon the driver to start.

Casimer seemed to be sleeping under its light mantle of snow, and as they left the town behind them and struck into the white, lonely road there was no sound save the musical tinkling of the sleigh bells, the trampling of the horses' hoofs, and the sharp cracking of the driver's heavy whip.

Once Phil turned over, that he might lie more comfortably; but the Russian policeman, whose name was Krapotkin, bent low and snarled a warning into his ear.

"Do not stir, Polish hound!" he said, "or I will borrow Pavsky's whip and lash you raw! In a couple of hours you will be before the chief of police in Warsaw, and when you have given the names of the conspirators, as you will be forced to do, we shall proceed to arrest them all. You will be a happy party. Think of it! All the Polish aristocrats of Casimer bound for Siberia!"

He broke into a loud guffaw, in which he was joined by Pavsky, the driver, and commenced to taunt Phil Trelawne afresh. But Phil never answered him, and this made him angry, so that he struck the boy a cruel blow in the face, and then addressed himself to Pavsky.

"This is a lonely road," he said.

"Very," returned the driver; "but we have not reached the worst of it. We pass through the western fringe of the forest presently, where there are always wolves."

"Bah! who's afraid of wolves?" cried Krapotkin.

"They are all fierce this winter and plentiful. Two children were killed by them last week, and a woman was pulled down and badly mauled," returned Pavsky.

"But they won't attack us," said Krapotkin. "And if they do I have my rifle. Have you a weapon?"

"Only my knife," answered Pavsky. "Why could not this Pole be kept till to-morrow? Why should he be taken to Warsaw to-night?"

"Because by dawn to-morrow we hope to have arrested all the conspirators," chuckled Krapotkin. "'Strike while the iron is hot' is our motto. I shall gain promotion for my share in this night's work. 'Twas I who struck this Pole down when he had nearly slipped past us. Is this the forest?"

"We are nearing it," replied Pavsky, and a few minutes

later the horses were trotting smartly down a long glade, where the giant trees, laden with snow, shut out the brilliant moonlight and the glittering stars, and where the light was dim and solemn.

Of a sudden one of the horses plunged, for a dark shape had bounded from the thicket and as quickly disappeared.

"A wolf!" muttered Pavsky. "Listen!"

A long-drawn howl echoed through the forest, like the cry of a lost soul. The horses heard it and took fright. Like mad things they dashed on!

Krapotkin was fumbling with his rifle and striving to control his fears. He was no coward when dealing with men, but here was something different—here was a danger which he never before had been called upon to face. Even Pavsky had not been chased by wolves. He had joined in a wolf hunt more than once, but this was his first experience of deadly peril. For the pack was on their trail! All knew that the long-drawn howl had been the leader's summons: all knew that from out the thicket, by twos and threes, the wolves were springing; and that soon hundreds might be close behind them.

Though lying upon his side, Phil Trelawne could look backward and see numberless fiery eyes, glaring like live coals, as the pack came scampering down the glade. They were very silent—ominously so; but when the horses were so blown that they relaxed their speed, the wolves surged like a great dark wave almost upon the sleigh, and with such suddenness that Krapotkin gave vent to a gasp of terror; then threw the butt of his rifle to his shoulder and pulled the trigger.

In the vast silence the shot sounded as loud as a cannon, and a thousand echoes rang in the glades.

A loud sharp yelp, once or twice repeated, told the fugitives that a wolf had been hit, but it was plain that the beast was still able to run with the pack, which came tirelessly along in pursuit.

"We are nearly out of the forest!" cried Pavsky.

"Fire again, Krapotkin! Fire again! Bring down two or three of the brutes, so that the rest will stop to devour them. That will give us a chance of escape!"

Bang! went the rifle once more; but Krapotkin had fired wildly and missed his mark.

"How many cartridges have you?" shouted Pavsky, cutting savagely at the horses with his huge whip.

"Only a dozen!" said Krapotkin. "That is to say, only a dozen were served out to each man to-night! I have ten left!"

"Only ten! Saints in heaven! Then we are lost!" shrieked the driver. "Be careful not to miss again!"

But Kropatkin did miss again, not once, but several times, so that he had shot but two wolves when he discovered that he had only a couple of cartridges left. The pack had halted twice, but in an incredibly short time they had devoured their fellow comrades, and were now coming along with the blood-thirst upon them. Having tasted blood they wanted more, and for the first time they began to yelp, to snarl, and to howl like a horde of demons.

Phil Trelawne had not stirred. Bound as he was he could do nothing; and though it was true that he now had the chance to roll from the sleigh into the snow, for Krapotkin seemed to have quite forgotten him, he knew that to do so would be but to throw his body to the wolves, and with a shudder he decided to stay where he was until the end.

But the terrible suspense grew too dreadful to be borne, and he begged Krapotkin to free his hands, that he might do something toward aiding the defense.

"Give me your knife!" he cried to Pavsky. "I will stab at the wolves when they come leaping around us! See, they are close upon the sleigh!"

With a roar of fury Krapotkin turned and glared at his prisoner, and in doing so his rifle slipped from his hand and fell upon the snow.

Krapotkin leaned forward and pulled the long keen blade from Pavsky's sheath, and at that moment the sleigh emerged from the forest.

Both the Russians gave a yell of joy, for there before them stretched the broad, white road, and again the bright moonlight streamed down, making the steppes as clear as day.

Suddenly Krapotkin turned a scared face toward the forest.

"The wolves are still coming! They're going to follow us across the steppes!" he cried. "See! here they come!"

With a deafening clamor the pack swept along in pursuit. It was as though they knew that the fugitives were practically defenseless. Nearer and nearer yet! The foremost was scampering along close behind the sleigh, and Phil was watching the beast's flaming eyes and wide open jaws with a sort of awful fascination. The boy's face was bruised and blood stained by the Russian's blows, but in this hour of peril he did not feel his hurt. All at once the leading wolf ran right ahead of the sleigh and sprang at one of the horses.

This was like a signal to the pack. They surged around the sleigh, they leaped high into the air, they snarled and yelled and flung themselves at Krapotkin, who, kneeling among the furs and straw, stabbed again and again at the gaunt, savage beasts which sprang at him.

Mad with desperation, the Russian fought like a fiend; while Pavsky mercilessly lashed the horses.

"Kill the boy!" he shrieked at last. "Stab him and fling him to the wolves! That is our only chance of escaping them!"

Phil Trelawne's blood ran cold in his veins, for in a flash Krapotkin had turned and struck at him with all his might.

Phil threw up his bound hands to defend his face and breast, and the keen knife hissed down between them, nearly cutting the cords in two and narrowly missing the boy's neck.

So savage was the thrust that the point of the knife sunk into the band of the sleigh, and in that instant, with a despairing effort, Phil burst the frayed cords and his hands were free! Ere the Russian could tug out the knife and strike at him again the young American had hit him in the face with all his strength. A low, lingering yell sounded, for Krapotkin had toppled over into the snow. And the wolves were upon him!

Pavsky turned his head, saw what had happened, and aimed a blow with his heavy whip at Phil Trelawne. It was now life against life, and Phil threw himself forward as the butt of the whip descended; then, getting the long knife free, he drove it to the hilt in Pavsky's side.

For an instant the man swayed in his seat; then, without cry or groan, he lurched forward and pitched headlong between the galloping horses.

Their furious hoofs spurned him—the sleigh passed over his body: and the wolves, having devoured Krapotkin, pounced ravenously upon their second victim.

Phil Trelawne glanced backward, then shivered, and seizing the reins, cheered the weary horses to one last effort. The lightened sleigh flew more swiftly over the snow, and with a cry of rapture Phil beheld just a little way ahead a rough hut built of wood. Toward this he drove; and, as he neared it shouted loudly for help: He was safe!

In the hut lived a Pole who was once a retainer of Count Majovice, and next day Phil Trelawne, to the amazement of his kinsman, arrived at the castle. But he did not stay there long. Within an hour, and ere the news of the death of Krapotkin and Pavsky was carried to Warsaw, Phil Trelawne was on his way to the capital, whence he took train for St. Petersburg.

No sooner did Colonel Trelawne hear his story than he packed him off to America, and as he is now studying hard for admission to the bar, he is not likely to be again concerned in a Polish plot; nor is he anxious to spend another holiday with Count Majovice and Sigismund. Nothing more was heard of the death of Pavsky and Krapotkin. In Poland, as in Russia, all things, they say, end in silence.

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